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LONE STAR,

The Cowboy Captain; or, The Mysterious Ranchero.

A ROMANCE OF WILD LIFE IN TEXAS.

BY COL. PRENTISS INGRAHAM,

AUTHOR OF "CRIMSON KATE," "GRIT, THE BRAVO SPORT," "BISON BILL," "GOLD PLUME," "LITTLE GRIT," ETC., ETC.



"NOW, PARDS, READY! ONE! TWO! THREE!"

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CHAPTER I.

THE BIVOUAC IN THE CHAPARRALS.

"PARDS, I says the thing is got to be did, or we won't hev hide or hoof in a year's time."

"You speaks ther truth, Ranger."

"So says we all of us."

At the last remark a chorus of voices cried out:

"That's the music, pards."

It was a bivouac in the Texas chaparrals not far from the Rio Pecos, and those who formed it were a band of cowboys from the ranches for miles around.

There were some thirty of them, and a daring, wild set, dead shots all of them, experts with the lariat, and perfect horsemen.

Some of them had evidently been born in the higher walks of life, and been forced by some escapade or crime to fly to the border for immunity from law, while others were men who had grown up upon the prairies, and loved the wild life they led as much as the sailor loves the sea.

A few of them were owners of small ranches with half a hundred head of cattle and a score of mustangs to call their own, but the majority were herders, or cowboys, for the neighboring rancheros or cattle kings.

Among the group, as having dispatched their frugal supper, they gathered around the campfire, more for sociability than warmth, was a man of herculean frame, sunburnt face, and clad in buckskin, even to his feet, which were incased in moccasins.

Feeding alone upon the prairie, or that is, not amid the group of animals belonging to the cowboys, was a large, long-limbed, gaunt-bodied mule.

The cowboys were all dressed in corduroy and velvet, imitating, in a great degree, the Mexican costume, and their heads were shaded by broad-brimmed sombreros, embroidered with gold or silver thread, and encircled by a cord of gold.

They wore sashes of red, blue and yellow, according to the taste of the wearer for colors, but these did not conceal the pair of revolvers and bowie in their belts.

Their saddles were also of the Mexican pattern, bespangled with silver, and huge spurs adorned the heels of their cavalry boots.

To the ordinary observer the party of cowboys might appear like a cavalcade of dandies; but a closer glance into the reckless, daring faces would show that they would be a dangerous crowd to face a body of foes, whether whites or red-skins.

With the large man in buckskin there was no show of the fanciful, for his buckskin attire was well worn, his gray blanket was old, faded, and in striking contrast to the gay colored serapes of the cowboys. His weapons, a rifle, pair of revolvers and knife, and I should not except his lariat, were homely but serviceable, and his saddle and bridle were, like his mule, utterly devoid of beauty.

The veteran's face was like parchment, his hair iron-gray, as was also his beard, and yet he seemed by no means old, for his eye was like a hawk's, and his actions as quick as a panther.

Old Bitters he was called, though what his other name was no one knew, and he had gained that cognomen when visiting San Antonio some years before and always calling for

"bitters" when going to a bar, for he was not a teetotaler by any means, nor was he a drunkard; but bitters was his drink, and he stuck to that beverage, as unfailingly as the name had since clung to him.

By occupation he was a hunter, trapper, Indian-fighter, guide, as the case might be, and his home was on the prairies, or in the mountains.

He had just pitched his camp for the night, when the band for cowboys dashed up, having been on the search for some cattle supposed to have been driven off by Mexican marauders.

"Git down an' camp, pards, fer yer mustangs looks played, an' it are night time, when honest folks sh'ud rest," had been his invitation to the cowboys, who readily consented, and at once had the bivouac been made, the ponies lariatied out, the supper cooked, and all assembled for the chat, which opens this story.

CHAPTER II.

A BOLD INTRUDER.

"BITTERS, you had oughter know what can be did ter sarcumvent these Greasers from stealin' cattle," said Ranger Ralph, one of the cowboys, who gained his border appellation from having once been a member of the rangers of the Rio Grande.

"I does know, Ranger Ralph," was Bitters's quiet reply.

"What then?"

The query came from a score of voices.

"Jest push straight on ther trail o' ther bandits, foller on across the Grande, and kill 'em on their own ground."

"But that will cause trouble with Mexico and the United States," said one.

"Nary; what does Mexico care about a few robbers being kilt?"

"I tell yer, they has run off thousands o' cattle an' hundreds o' mustangs, an' you kin git 'em all back, for I knows whar they has a lay-out."

"And you'll lead us there, Bitters?" cried several voices.

"I'll guide yer thar, pards; but I doesn't take no lead, for I isn't no general, tho' I kin do a little scrimmages on my own hook."

Those who knew Bitters were well aware of this fact, and were most anxious to have him lead them, and one said:

"Well, Bitters, you be our captain and lead us against them."

"Yes, you be captain, Bitters."

"Bravo for Captain Bitters, ther boss o' ther cowboys," and the cowboys gave a ringing cheer.

"Cap'n Durnation! now Bitters w'u'd be a handsome name—Cap'n Bitters—for the Army Registry, wouldn't it, though?"

"Nary cap'n in mine, pards, so I resigns; but I'll guide yer, ef yer elects a cap'n I isn't afeerd ter foller."

All argument to be their chief failing upon the scout, the cowboys began to look among their number for a captain, and Ranger Ralph said, modestly:

"If you are satisfied with me, pards, I would be your captain."

"Nary, for you hasn't ther full amount o' sand that are needed ter fill ther bill," was Bitters's quiet response.

At this all of the boys laughed, excepting Ralph, whose face flushed, and then grew pale with anger, while he said, stoutly:

"No man dare say I am a coward."

"No man will say yer is a brave man ontill he sees yer tried on, pard Ralph. You may be a terror, but yer doesn't look it, an' as we was ter obey a cap'n, I moves, although I hain't a cowboy, that we doesn't elect no man leader as hasn't been know'd ter be clean grit to the backbone."

"You are right, Bitters," said one, while Ranger Ralph remarked:

"I confess I am something of a stranger among the boys, having only lately come here, but having been a ranger, I thought my experience might be worth something."

"You is handsome, I'll allow; yer figger are all right, too, yer rides well, an' I has seen yer shoot dead center; but for real out-an'-outer grit yer don't look it."

"You may find out that I have grit if you continue your insulting remarks," was the angry retort of Ralph, as he glared upon the scout, who laughed lightly and replied:

"Boy, I has seen a panther look me in the eye, an' I wasn't skeert, so that scowl don't make me tremble, an' ef yer had been ther man ter lead ther boys, yer'd hev had me licked afore this, fer ef any man hed said ter me what I has ter you, ther' would hev been a fight or a foot-race immediate."

"I hasn't nothin' ag'in' yer, I swear, only as this are a perilsome trip, an' I am ter be guide, I wants some one ter go as cap'n who we knows won't back at any danger."

"Hain't I right, cowboys?"

All gave a unanimous assent, and Ranger Ralph's aspirations to leadership were squelched, though, had Bitters not spoken as he did, there would have been no doubt of his becoming captain, as he sung a good song, spent his money freely, and was generally liked and believed to be a brave man.

"Well, who is to be captain?" asked Ranger Ralph, trying to conceal his mortification and anger, and yet most anxious to avoid trouble with Bitters, who had a reputation for fearlessness that had never been belied.

No one answered the question, for not any of the number cared to put himself up for a target for the tongue of Bitters to open on.

They looked from one to the other, and it was evident that they were in a quandary, for though there were several who would have liked to have been chosen captain, a glance at the face of Bitters was sufficient to deter them from proposing themselves for the important position.

"I propose that Lucky Luke be made cap'n," presently suggested one of the cowboys.

The person thus proposed smiled and glanced his thanks at the one making the motion, and then had only to look furtively around the circle of faces to see that the move was not going to be seconded and unanimously carried.

He was a devil-may-care sort of fellow, nominally a cowboy, but who allowed the cattle to roam to Ballyhak if he could get a game of cards started, and Bitters was the only one present who had not felt his prowess at gambling.

A bully, too, in his way, he was not as popular as he believed himself.

"Don't nobody second the motion o' Mustang Mike?" asked Lucky Luke.

No answer came, and he continued:

"I seconds it myself, then; who speaks ag'in' it?"

He glanced around upon the cowboys until his eyes rested upon Bitters.

"He are so lucky at keerds, I thought as how he might be ther same at fightin' Greasers," said Mustang Mike, one of the greatest sufferers at Lucky Luke's hands, and offering the latter remark as a kind of amendment of his proposition.

"As you looks at me, pard, more'n at t'others, I s'pose yer wants a answer?" said Bitters, quietly.

"Yes, I want to know what you has ag'in' me."

"Nuthin' o' my own knowledge, tho' I has heerd yer is a card-sharp."

"Then you do not oppose my being cap'n o' ther cowboys," and Lucky Luke looked as though the scout dare not oppose him.

"I said I had nothin' ag'in' yer, pard, an' I hain't fer ordinary work; but I hain't a fool ter go as guide under yer, ef yer is made cap'n."

"By Jove! you'll find I hain't Ranger Ralph ter talk ter as yer please," cried the cowboy, savagely.

"You is worse than he are—hold on, yer see my weepins is too convenient fer a man ter git ther drop on me," and anticipatin the intention of Lucky Luke to draw a revolver,

Bitters had him covered with the quickness of a flash of light.

Neither man had moved from his seat in the circle around the camp-fire, and as Bitters covered the heart of the cowboy, matters began to look as though there would be trouble, when Ranger Ralph called out:

"Hold on, pard, we don't want any row among ourselves just now, so let us find a captain and drop quarreling."

"Yes, yes, let us select a captain," cried another, while the others, seemingly anxious to avoid trouble with the scout, chimed in, and Bitters said:

"I agree, for I hate to draw on a feller-critter, ef it hain't a Injun. But ef I are axed fer my opinion, I gives it squar'."

"Now, who is goin' ter be cap'n?"

"Let me settle that troublesome question by offering myself as your captain."

The words fell distinctly and sharply upon the ears of all, and in a strange voice, that caused every one present to spring to his feet, draw a weapon and turn in the direction of the speaker.

CHAPTER III.

SHOWING HIS CLAWS.

THE surprise was general upon all, even to Bitters, when they saw who was the speaker.

Beholding that he was alone, they dropped their hands from their weapons and simply gazed upon him in mute amazement.

The bold intruder upon the cowboy council was a mere youth, in fact he could not have passed sixteen years of age.

His form was wiry, symmetrical and denoted endurance and strength beyond his years.

He was clad in a Mexican jacket of black velvet, open in front and displaying a white flannel shirt, the collar of which was turned down over a black silk cravat, knotted sailor style.

His pants were gray corduroy, stuck in top boots, upon the heels of which were gold spurs.

His sombrero was black, the brim turned up in front over his forehead, and pinned thereon was a large star of solid gold, in the center of which was set a ruby of considerable value, and in each of the five points was imbedded a diamond, making it a costly and elegant ornament.

A red silk sash encircled his waist, but half hiding a belt of silver links, with buckle of gold.

In this belt were a pair of revolvers upon either hip, a long-bladed bowie on the right side in front, a cartridge-pouch upon the left, and at his back hung a repeating rifle, all of the weapons being mounted with silver, and having on them a lone star of gold, set with gems as was the one in his hat.

The cowboys took in all these peculiarities, for so they seemed on a mere youth alone in that wild country, and then saw that behind him half a dozen paces stood a jet-black horse patiently waiting, and rigged out in bridle and Mexican saddle fully as fanciful as was his master in dress.

"Gentlemen, does the sight of me prevent any of you seconding my motion that I become your captain?" asked the youth in a pleasant voice, and the smile that lighted up his face at his words a woman might have envied, as she might also his pure complexion, perfect features, large dark eyes, and long curling golden hair that fell in luxuriant waves upon his broad shoulders.

"Waal, ef you can't give a Government rule odds on cheek an' take ther trick, commend me fer a liar an' a fool, my fancy hand-box canary-bird."

The speaker was Lucky Luke, and the words broke the spell which the coming of the youth seemed to have cast upon all, for some laughed at the remark.

"I happened to be near enough, my festive card-sharp, to learn awhile since that as a cheat you might be a success, but as a want-to-be captain you were a failure, so you had better hold your tongue."

The words broke crisply from the lips of the young stranger, and caused a general laugh, Bitters breaking forth in a way that made his mule, Balaam, bray in response with a vigor that was not to be outdone.

"Cuss thet long-eared mule o' mine. He knows better then ter howl like thet in ther prairies," cried Bitters.

"He heard you laugh and thought it was the bray of a comrade, doubtless; don't blame him," remarked the youth.

The laughter was checked, and all eyes turned upon Bitters, for they expected to see him leap out at the youth; but instead he said frankly:

"Leetle pard, yer has a tongue thet are keen as a razer, an' I loves ter hear yer use it, so sail in, fer thet are my mule, Balaam, an'—"

"And you are Balaam's ass?" was the quick query, and once more the laugh went round, Bitters again bursting forth in his boy-like hilarity, which was promptly responded to as before by the mule.

But in this merriment Lucky Luke did not join, nor did Ranger Ralph, and both looked cross, though why the latter no one knew.

"You has a tongue as I will clip, ef yer chins ter me ag'in, youngster," snarled Lucky Luke, wishing to renew the quarrel apparently.

"That's right, Luke! Cut his claws fer coming into our camp and putting on airs, which, if he was not a boy, I'd spank him for."

The last speaker was Ranger Ralph, and thus encouraged, Lucky Luke responded:

"I've half a mind to lay a leetle stick upon him."

The young stranger had not moved, since his first words had so surprised the cowboys; but now he stepped quickly forward, and confronting both Lucky Luke and Ranger Ralph, said sternly:

"I'll bet that neither of you dare lay hands upon me."

This bold attitude at once gained favor in the eyes of Bitters and the right-minded of the cowboys, and all crowded nearer, while Lucky Luke said in a surly tone:

"Waal, you'll see; hold on, Ranger Ralph, it are my deal now, an' what I leave o' him you kin hev."

He stretched forth his hand as he spoke, to seize the youth, when he suddenly went tumbling heels over head backward among the mesquite trees, amid a general cheer.

Rising in fury he again rushed upon the youth, to again go down under a well-directed blow squarely in the face.

Without waiting to see what his adversary would do, the youth turned quickly to Ranger Ralph, and said:

"Now, sir, you can have what's left of me."

This challenge Ranger Ralph dared not refuse; but having seen how splendidly the stranger used his fists, and not wishing his handsome face bruised, he dropped his hand upon his revolver, and said:

"This is my weapon to fight with."

"What do I care for your revolver?" was the contemptuous reply, and the youth dropped both hands upon his own weapons, sprung swiftly backward, and with his back to a tree, confronted Ranger Ralph and Lucky Luke, for the latter had now drawn a weapon and was going to use it too, to judge from the expression in his face, which was livid with rage, and stained with blood where the blow of the youth had cut his brow.

"Hold on, pard, fer I hes a word to git in edgeways jist at this p'int o' ther fun," and Bitters stepped between the youth and the two angry cowboys, and held up his hands upon either side, as though to warn them that he would have his say just there.

CHAPTER IV.

A TRIANGULAR DUEL.

"WAAL, what has yer ter say, old man, fer I doesn't want none o' yer foolin' with me any

longer?" said Lucky Luke in savage tones, turning upon Old Bitters.

"Yes, you have no right to interfere here," put in Ranger Ralph.

"Waal, I jist takes ther right, when I sees two durned cowardly bullies wantin' ter fight a boy."

"You know 'em, I see, old man," said the youth in a tone that brought another round of laughter.

"I know that you has got ther grit needed ter make 'em take water, an' ef they fights yer it's got ter be on ther squar', leetle pard," was the honest reply of Old Bitters.

"Yes, they can't both jump on the boy," cried one of the cowboys, and a chorus of voices called out for fair play.

"Let us fight him then as you decide," said Lucky Luke, turning to Bitters, as soon as he saw that his comrades were going to have fair play.

"Give me a chance at him first, and I'll avenge those two blows he gave you, Luke," said Ranger Ralph.

"Waal, I guess we'll ask him how he wants ter fight," remarked Bitters, turning to the youth.

"Ah, suit yourselves, don't mind me," was the indifferent reply, and it was evident that the youth was growing in favor with all excepting his two foes.

"He's scienced, as I knows, with his fists, so I suppose he wants ter try knocking," put in Lucky Luke.

"You are scienced too with your fingers, I have heard," and at this lick at his propensity for cheating at cards Lucky Luke looked daggers, for he saw that his comrades enjoyed it.

"It's a shame that we have to put up with the cuts of that strange boy, and can't hit back," said Ranger Ralph.

"No one hinders you, I'm sure, and I'd rather like it if you did hit back, but I believe you are afraid."

"Say, Bitters, if you are going to arrange a fight with that fellow and Luke or myself, for I'll wing him, if he keeps on as he does, and which he only does because you all seem to back him up," and it was evident that Ranger Ralph was now in as savage a humor as was Lucky Luke.

"Jest say how you wants to fight him, an' I'll see fair play all round," said Bitters.

"Let me decide, if they are so anxious," and the youth turned to Old Bitters.

"Waal, what are it to be?"

"I happened to overhear the talk you had round your camp-fire, and seeing as you didn't want either of that precious pair for a captain, I offered myself, and they got mad about it."

"Now, I'm a stranger to you all here, and must act more and talk less, and I'm perfectly willing to fight those two fellows with any weapons they wish to choose."

There was something in the fearless manner of the youth that won admiration, and Bitters cried:

"That are squar' talk an' no Injun business, an' you two gerloots hes only ter name yer weepins, an' from what I hes seen I'd 'vise yer not ter take yer grippers, fer Luke hev got two marks on his face now from ther right one o' th t game child."

"My weapon is here, and if he is not afraid to face me, he can step out," and Ranger Ralph tapped his revolver and spoke in a most pompous manner, evidently intended to awe the youth.

"And thet are my weepin too; but I guesses I won't hev ter draw, ef Ralph hes ther fust pull," and Lucky Luke seemed not in the least to regret that Ranger Ralph was to first meet the daring boy stranger, who, with a light laugh answered:

"I wouldn't be so cruel as to disappoint you, card-sharp, so I'll tell you what I'll do, as I am anxious to get this affair off my hands, for I was in earnest in offering myself for the captain of the cowboys, and there's no time to lose, if you want to follow El Cobra and his band."

"Yer talks straight, leetle pard, you does; but give us yer plan," put in Old Bitters.

"Well, I'll take my stand here by the fire-light, and we can build two more fires at right angles from me, and ten paces away, and you give the word, for I believe you are square as man can be, and I'll fight them both at the same time, running the chance of their two shots and having but one each at them."

"Boy, is yer mad?" broke from the lips of Old Bitters, while all were astounded at this reckless offer of the youth to meet the two cowboys.

"No, I know what I am about, and I don't want to kill them; but I'll mark them so that they'll remember me," was the cool response.

"Mark them?" asked one of the cowboys, in surprise, and a handsome young man of twenty-two, whose refined face and courtly manner seemed out of place on the border.

"Yes, mark them; that is, I'll send a bullet through their ears, if they stand fronting me, and if they don't I guess I might as well send it on through their heads."

Old Bitters shook his head queerly, for in all his wanderings upon the Texas border he had never before met with a youth like the one who stood before him, and deeply interested he said:

"Waal, ef yer is durned enough fool ter fight two men, it hain't fer me ter say no, fer yer knows yer own business best, so all I kin do is to give the word, an' all shall go squar', fer ef them two galoots chips in with a shot afore I says fire, then they'll get a leetle cold lead out o' my shootin'-iron."

As he spoke he gathered up a handful of wood and walking off ten paces began to build a fire.

"Are you really in earnest about fighting both of these men?" asked Elegant Ed, as the young man with the refined face and winning, though sad manner was called by his comrades.

"Certainly."

"They are both dead shots."

"So am I."

"You are too splendid a fellow to be killed by these fellows, and I will see Old Bitters and stop it."

"No, it must go on; I sought the quarrel with them; but they felt sore over being refused as captain, and were anxious for trouble, so let them have it, though, as I said before, I do not care to kill them—at least the one they call Ralph, though the other I am not particular about."

The words of the youth were heard by several of the cowboys, besides Elegant Ed, to whom they were addressed, and but added to the astonishment caused by the stranger who had so unceremoniously presented himself in their camp.

With a sigh Elegant Ed turned away, and stepping off ten paces from the camp-fire, at once built another, and soon the three fires sent forth a cheery blaze.

As they were situated, they formed three corners of a square, a triangle, and at the center of these, after quietly lariatting his horse out upon the prairie, the strange youth took his stand.

Ranger Ralph and Lucky Luke also took their stands, each at one of the other fires.

This placed the stranger in front of them as they stood, and the light from the fires fell brightly upon each one of the three.

In their right hands Ranger Ralph and Lucky Luke held their revolvers; but the youth did not draw his weapons until Old Bitters had carefully measured the distances, and placed all three.

Between the two cowboys, and a little back out of the line, Old Bitters took his stand, and behind him were grouped the cowboys.

When ready, the youth stood facing Old Bitters, which gave him upon either side a good look at his foes.

At the word he was to fire at each of his adversaries, having a revolver in each hand,

while they were to fire upon him, he thereby taking double chances against them.

And yet he seemed wholly indifferent to the danger he would run, and this very indifference rendered both Ranger Ralph and Lucky Luke somewhat nervous, in spite of the confidence they had in their aim.

With sheer bravado Lucky Luke, as one of his comrades told him, with a light laugh, to stand so the youth could clip his ear, turned sideways to him.

But Ranger Ralph, whether from accident or design, stood fronting the youth, which drew forth the remark from Bitters:

"He's got ter shoot close ter clip *your* ears, Ranger Ralph, though he c'd'n't miss Lucky Luke's if he stood squar' facin' him, as they is durned nigh as large as Balaam's."

This sally brought forth a laugh, for in that wild crowd none seemed to feel that death was close at hand, or if so, to care.

"Pards, I b'lieves I holds ther sarvice," said Bitters, addressing the three duelists.

The youth bowed and smiled, and Lucky Luke answered:

"You hain't no worse than no one else to give ther word."

"I don't care a cat who gives it," was Ranger Ralph's reply.

"Waal, I is glad yer is all so waal pleased, and all I has ter say is thet I counts *three*, and then says *fire*, an' ef any one o' yer draws trigger afore ther word *fire*, I sends a bullet s'archin' fer his life-chist. Hain't that squar' dealin', pards?" and Old Bitters turned to the cowboys, who answered promptly in the affirmative.

"Now, pards, ready! One! two! three!"

The last word was cut off by the flash of three weapons—two together almost, the third a second later.

One of the three duelists dropped his revolver and turned half round.

Another fell in his tracks, and the third stood like a statue.

CHAPTER V.

LONE STAR, THE COWBOY CAPTAIN.

THE two shots that had flashed almost simultaneously were fired by the strange youth.

With a quickness of movement that was marvelous he had raised both hands, and the slightest movement of his head, or rather eyes, had been sufficient to send two bullets unerringly upon their mission, one to bury itself in the head of Lucky Luke, passing through his ear to do so, and the other to clip the edge of Ranger Ralph's ear, and momentarily cause him to think he had received a death-wound.

Without a groan Lucky Luke fell dead in his tracks, the undischarged revolver, for he had not had time to fire, dropping from his hand.

Ranger Ralph's shot had followed those of the youth immediately, but the thought that he was killed destroyed his usually unerring aim, and his pellet passed by within an inch of his adversary's head.

Dropping his weapon, Ranger Ralph clasped his hands to his head, and tottered away from his position, until recalled by the cool words of the stranger:

"You are not hurt, sir; only my mark on you; but that fellow is done for."

Instantly Ranger Ralph realized that he had only lost a piece of his ear, and in fury he turned upon the youth, feeling that he had lost a part of his personal beauty.

"Hold on, Ranger Ralph! None of that!" and Elegant Ed's revolver covered his breast, and just in time, for he would have shot the youth, who had not expected treachery, and had turned to Old Bitters, who addressed him.

"You've got nothing to do with me, Elegant Ed," growled Ranger Ralph.

"I will have, though, if you try that mean game on a boy who has met you squarely, and I, for one, won't see him imposed on."

"That's the talk, Ed! Thet boy are all man an' no mistake," cried one of the cowboys, and seeing that he would be most summarily dealt

with, Ranger Ralph lowered his revolver and turned scowlingly away, muttering vengeance, and nursing his clipped ear at the same time.

"Pard, yer is a terror ter sinners, you is, an' Old Bitters offers you his grip ~~from~~ now until he turns up his toes at ther Master's call!" cried Old Bitters, grasping the hand of the youth in a gripe of iron, and adding, as he felt the return grasp:

"You has the squeeze of a grizzly b'ar, an' no mistake, an' I don't wonder that Luke went ter grass under yer fist; but yer sent him under ther last time, an' I are a sweet-scented liar ef Ranger Ralph hain't got a cattle mark on his ear, fer I seen where yer bullit cleft him."

"What are yer name, so I kin interjuce yer?"

"I am called Lone Star," was the quiet response.

"And I move we add to it the Cowboy Captain," shouted Elegant Ed.

"Bravo! Three cheers for the Cowboy Captain," cried another.

Instantly sombreros were waved in the air, and three rousing cheers were given, only two lips remaining silent, and those forever silenced, for they were pallid in death, though the sightless eyes of Lucky Luke were gazing, seemingly, straight into the face of the youth as the cheers echoed through the chaparral.

As for Ranger Ralph, with sudden impulse he waved his sombrero and cheered, too, while coming forward he said, with apparent honesty:

"You fought us square, young fellow, and I offer you my hand for my part, though poor Luke cannot."

"If you offer it in true friendship I'll take it, but if it's merely as a foil to let you play snake in the grass I won't."

"If you are a man you will say how you mean it!"

This bold reply of the youth caused Ranger Ralph to blush crimson, and all turned breathlessly toward the two; but the reply came in seeming honesty:

"I offer it as your friend, bearing no ill-will from my defeat."

"Then I accept it, and we will be friends."

"Now let us get that body out of sight, for it's not a pleasant thing to look upon one you have killed," and the youth pointed over to where Lucky Luke lay.

"Yas, we'll plant him decent, ef he did finger cards ter win every time," said one of the cowboys, and several of them volunteering for the work of burial, bore the body back into the gloom of the chaparral, while Old Bitters remarked:

"Now, pard Lone Star, you jist come an' we'll hev a leetle chat about goin' arter ther Greasers under El Cobra, fer yer is cap'n o' ther cowboys now an' no mistake."

CHAPTER VI.

THE COURIER'S TIDINGS.

"FIRST, let me ask yer, pard Lone Star, ef yer has hed any grub, fer, as I were camped here when ther boys come up I kinder looks upon ther camp as my lay-out, an' consequent I plays hospital," and Bitters smiled as blandly as ever host smiled upon a boarder.

"I am really hungry, I'll admit, and was looking for a place to camp when I saw your fire," said the youth, and instantly there were cold meats and crackers produced from haversacks, and a pot of fresh coffee was put on to boil, while the youth unsaddled his splendid black horse, lariatting him out again, and, returning to the fire, ate with the relish of a hungry schoolboy.

"May I ask," began Bitters, when all the cowboys were assembled around the camp-fire gazing upon the young stranger with admiration, "whar yer hails from when yer is at home?"

"I am a Texan," was the quiet response.

"Then yer must know these heur pararers an' ther hills towards ther Pecos ef yer lives near heur?" and it was evident that, if questioning would accomplish it, Old Bitters in-

tended learning more of the strange boy that had so mysteriously appeared in their midst, and proved himself every inch a man since his arrival.

"I know the country pretty well, for I have a ranch north of here some forty miles."

"What! Is you the Boy Ranchero I has heard of living not far from Horsehead Crossing?" cried Bitters in evident surprise.

"Yes, I am called the Boy Ranchero, and I live not very far from Horsehead."

"And you lives thar all alone, an' ther Injuns don't pester yer?"

"No, I am not much bothered by Indians, though El Cobra's hand pay me a visit now and then, and have just run off half a hundred head of my cattle and a few mustangs."

"That was why I came down this way, to see if the cowboys wouldn't strike their trail and follow them into Mexico, for I know their haunts there."

"That's the music!"

"You're ther boss!"

"Now you is talkin'!"

"You lead, we'll foller!"

Such were the remarks following the words of Lone Star, while Elegant Ed said:

"That is just what we wish to do, and if we can only punish El Cobra and his band severely, he'll let us alone in future; but don't you think we ought to have more men?"

"How many are there of you?"

"Twenty-nine, since you killed Luke," said Ranger Ralph.

"I s'pose I is considered nobody," put in Old Bitters.

"I was speaking of cowboys."

"Oh! waal I isn't no cowboy, but I counts fer a man, an' I hes heard folks say as I were no slouch."

Anxious to prevent trouble apparently, for he could see that the old scout did not love Ranger Ralph, Lone Star said quickly:

"All told we are thirty-one, and that is not enough."

"We can raise about ten more boys by morning, from Dean's Ranch, which lays south of here ten miles," volunteered Elegant Ed.

"Then you had better send two men after them, for we must start early to-morrow, and I hope, gentlemen, you will not object to my making this young man lieutenant," and the youthful captain pointed to Elegant Ed.

"Nary."

"He's ther very boy."

"He's so durned modest he hung back when we was lookin' fer a cap'n, or he mout hev been ther boss," were the remarks that followed the query of Lone Star.

"Then that is settled, and I guess there is no dissenting voice to taking Bitters as guide?"

"I'd take bitters all ther tim', ef I hed 'em," volunteered one of the cowboys.

Two men at once started off to the Dean Ranch for other reinforcements, and those that remained around the camp-fire continued to discuss the proposed expedition across the Rio Grande after the bandit chief known as El Cobra, who was the terror of that part of the frontier, raiding as he did into Texas with his cruel robbers, whenever opportunity offered to make a large capture and escape.

Presently Lone Star, who was talking, ceased, and said:

"I hear a horse galloping off on the prairie."

"You hes ther ears o' Balaam, my ole mule, ef yer kin, for I doesn't hear a sound," answered Bitters.

"I do, and he is coming this way, evidently seeing our fire," firmly responded the youth.

All listened attentively, and then to their ears came the faint fall of hoofs, and it was soon evident, as they became more distinct, that the horse was drawing nearer.

"You jist keep yer seats, pards, an' I'll see who he are," and Bitters quietly left the circle and disappeared in the darkness, in the direction from whence had come the sound that had reached their ears.

Nearer and nearer came the fall of hoofs, until suddenly rung out clearly the voice of Old Bitters:

"Hold on, pard! I hes ther drop on yer."

The answer came as the horse was suddenly reined back by its rider:

"I am a courier on the way to Fort Duncan with dispatches."

"Then you is welcome, fer ther boys is yonder at ther fire," said Bitters, and the next moment he joined the group, accompanied by a cavalry soldier.

The man showed evidences of fatigue, and his horse had evidently been hard driven, for he was panting like a fox-hound, and covered with foam.

The rider wore no hat, but had a handkerchief fastened around his head, and it was stained with blood.

"You is welcome, pard, for these is cowboys from the ranches, and I are Old Bitters, ther scout, of whom yer may hev heard."

"Thet han'some young feller are Lone Star, ther cap'n o' ther Cowboys, an' now yer knows ther gang."

With this characteristic introduction, Old Bitters motioned the soldier to a seat near Lone Star, and began to hunt round for something for him to eat, while one of the cowboys looked after his horse.

"This is a great lift for me, and I needed it, comrades, for I've ridden hard, and have to go on to Fort Duncan with bad news," said the soldier, dropping into a seat on a log in a tired way.

"Where are you from?" asked Lone Star.

"Fort Terrell, and there were five of us, a sergeant and four men, escorting Major Bainbridge's daughter to Duncan, where her father was ordered some weeks ago."

"We had an ambulance, in which Miss Bainbridge slept at night, for she rode horseback all day, and we had reached the Neuces crossing, when we halted for rest, and suddenly we were set upon by a band of Mexicans, led by a chief wearing a hood—"

"El Cobra!" cried a score of voices.

"Yes," continued the soldier, "it must have been that devilish masked Mexican."

"And Miss Bainbridge, and your comrades?" cried Lone Star excitedly.

"The sergeant, three soldiers and driver of the ambulance were killed, and Miss Bainbridge was carried off by the bandits, while I managed to escape and was riding to Fort Duncan to carry the news to her father."

"But they wounded me in the head, as you see, though it don't amount to much, and I can go on if I can get a fresh horse."

"You shall have a fresh horse, for there is one here whose rider was killed awhile since," and Lone Star spoke with the utmost coolness, and continued:

"You can tell Major Bainbridge that the cowboys are already on the trail of El Cobra, and shall follow him into Mexico, for we start at once."

A cheer broke from the group of daring Texans, and telling Elegant Ed to leave two of the men, who had the most horses, to await the coming of the reinforcements, and then follow on with them, Lone Star ordered the band to mount for the trail of the Mexican bandits.

Half an hour after they were going at a slow trot in the direction of the Rio Grande river, while the two men left in camp composed themselves calmly to rest, and the soldier, mounted upon Lucky Luke's mustang, was pressing on to Fort Duncan with the tidings of his daughter's capture to Major Bainbridge.

CHAPTER VII.

BESSIE BAINBRIDGE.

THERE was no lovelier girl ever lived in frontier fort than was Bessie Bainbridge, and even the most humble hanger-on about the posts where her father had been stationed, loved her for her beauty and noble character.

Did a soldier get wounded, or was taken ill, it was Bessie's hand that made him some little

tempting delicacy and sent it to him, while she also would send him books from her own library to read when he was convalescing.

Did one escape punishment through being pardoned an offense, it was Bessie's pleading that did it, and all in the fort, from the highest officer down to the very teamsters, seemed to vie in rendering her some service and making her presents.

The Indian scouts made her moccasins, belts and dressed skins for her; the white hunters brought her game and many a gay-plumaged bird, and the soldiers had gathered her a perfect museum of curiosities in their rambles, while the officers, young and old, sought to win her heart, for she appeared to be fancy free.

Her father, at the death of her mother, had allowed her to go to school abroad, with some cousins who had been sent to Paris, and at seventeen she had returned to the United States, and after two years' sojourn in New York, had gone out to the Western border to join her father, who was then commandant of a fort on the Rio Grande.

Why she had given up the gay and fascinating life of the metropolis for that of a frontier garrison, was past finding out, and yet her father, who often caught her unexpectedly in tears, and with a dreamy, far-away look upon her beautiful face, felt that she had been heart hurt, young as she was.

But, as she made him not voluntarily her confidant, he would not seek to pry into the past, especially as it was only at times he found her thus moody, and at all other times she was the gayest of the gay.

She had not been long at the fort before she became a thorough and fearless horsewoman, could shoot rifle or pistol with unerring aim, and also had become a good bow and arrow shot, and an accomplished lariat-thrower.

Of course by her beauty and accomplishments, Bessie won the envy and jealousy of some of the wives and daughters of the other officers of the garrison, and it was on account of some of these that Major Bainbridge had asked to be ordered to Texas.

His daughter had accompanied him to Fort Terrell, and upon arriving there he had received orders to repair to Fort Duncan for a few weeks.

After a stay of a couple of months, he found that he was to be stationed there for quite a length of time, and it was then that he had sent an ambulance with an escort of a sergeant and four men to bring Bessie to him.

Those whom she left at Fort Terrell had been loath to give her up, while all at Duncan were on the *qui vive* for the arrival of the Belle of the Border as Bessie Bainbridge had been named.

But while *en route* to join her father, happy in the thought of soon meeting him, out of the shadows of the timber where her small escort had halted for the noonday rest and meal, darted a party of horsemen.

They were fierce-faced men, well-mounted and armed, and their dark complexions bespoke their Mexican blood.

At their head, splendidly mounted on an inky-black steed, gorgeously caparisoned with silver-mounted saddle and bridle, was a man clad as a Mexican cavalry officer, and wearing over his head a black hood and mask combined, and which had gained for him the name of El Cobra.*

Taken wholly by surprise, for they had expected to meet with no danger on the road, the small escort could offer but slight resistance to the overwhelming force of horsemen that dashed upon them.

But they fought bravely, and several Mexicans fell ere the soldiers and ambulance driver were cut down with one exception, who, seeing that resistance was hopeless, had made good his escape, as the reader already knows.

At the time of the attack Bessie Bainbridge had been enjoying an after-dinner nap in the

* El Cobra. A hooded snake of the most deadly kind. THE AUTHOR.

ambulance, when she was rudely awakened by finding herself in the grasp of two powerful men, against whom resistance was vain.

Five minutes after the mules had been hitched to the ambulance, and away it dashed, driven by one of her captors, while the other sat stolidly by her side.

And behind came the band of fierce horsemen, with their hooded chief at their head, and one glance at him was sufficient to convince poor Bessie that she was in the power of an outlaw of whose cruelty the wildest stories were told.

CHAPTER VIII.

EL COBRA.

THE sun was just setting when the hooded chief called a halt in a clump of timber, after having driven his horses hard during the afternoon.

In the distance glimmered the waters of the Rio Grande, of which river it is said that one who drinks of its waters, wander where he may through life, will return to drink again ere he dies.

The mountains near at hand were a good place of refuge for the band of El Cobra should pursuit follow, and so he seemed to feel, as the men took the halt very leisurely and prepared to make a night camp of it.

The ambulance was driven to a secluded and pleasant spot, and poor Bessie, who was very pale, but calm, was left alone, as the impossibility of her escape was fully realized by her captors.

Seated upon the mossy bank she watched the picturesque, weird scene, as the Rio Grande robbers were building camp-fires, preparing to cook their evening meal and staking their horses out to feed upon the juicy grass with which the hillsides and valleys abounded.

At another time Bessie would have been charmed with the scene, and glad to sketch it for a painting at leisure; but now she knew that she was the captive of a person said to be merciless to man and woman alike.

The stories of his cruelties and crimes might be exaggerated by the scouts, rancheros, cowboys and soldiers that made them almost a nightly theme of the bivouac and mess-table; but still there was enough to be proven against him to show that he was a bad, bold man.

As Bessie looked over the scene she saw the chief standing by a large camp-fire, at which a Peon servant was busy cooking.

He stood with his arms folded upon his broad breast, his eyes peering from the eyelet holes in the hood into the fire, and his whole attitude that of one in deep reverie.

Certainly a splendid specimen of manhood he looked, as he stood there; but, though the image was noble, the heart was warped with the deformity of evil.

Presently a horseman dashed up to the chief, dismounted, and, saluting as a soldier would an officer, said, in Spanish:

"The Senor Capitan Maral comes from the southern raid, senor chief, and will reach here within the hour."

"With what success?" sternly asked the chief.

"He has hundreds of cattle, and scores of mustangs, senor."

"Any fighting?"

"None, senor chief, excepting the defending of a ranch now and then."

"And the senor Captain Pedro?"

"I know naught of him, senor chief."

"All right; now see that Senor Maral comes at once with his cattle."

The horseman mounted and dashed away in the darkness just as another rode up, and Bessie Bainbridge heard, as before she had, what passed.

"Ha, Captain Pedro, you are prompt," cried the chief, recognizing one of his officers whom he had sent upon a raid among the ranches where the cowboys whom the reader has met had their homes.

"I am on time, senor chief, and I have a

thousand head of hoofs, counting cattle and mustangs," was the reply.

"You have done well, Pedro; but had you any fighting?"

"None to speak of, chief, though I think the Pecos cowboys are organizing for pursuit."

"Let them come, for by the morning we can be across the river, and there they dare not follow us," said El Cobra in a contemptuous tone. Then he added:

"How far back are your men with the herd?"

"In sight, senor, for I rode on when I saw your camp-fires."

"I hope you were successful too?" answered Pedro.

"Oh, yes, for I will never fail in what I undertake."

"The senorita is yonder by that ambulance."

At these words poor Bessie grew livid with dread, and her heart seemed to stop beating, when she knew that her capture had not been accidental, as she had believed, but intentional.

"Heaven have mercy, for what will become of me?" she groaned, dropping her head in her hands as she spoke, and bursting into tears.

CHAPTER IX.

JUAN THE PEON.

At last Bessie grew calm, and feeling the uselessness of giving way to her feelings determined to be brave and strong, and watch any chance for an escape from the power of the hated monster.

Her riding-horse, a present from her father, was lariatied a hundred yards away from the ambulance, in which were her saddle and bridle; but could she reach her splendid animal, one of the fleetest steeds upon the prairies, she cared not for accouterments, but would ride bare-back, as she had often done before, and Arrow would obey her words of command without a bit in his mouth.

As she was meditating a run to where she had seen Arrow lariatied out before dark, the peon servant approached her with supper.

"The chief sends this to the senorita," he said politely, and he placed before her a pot of fragrant coffee, a silver cup and spoon, a small bag of sugar, a venison-steak deliciously cooked, a quail nicely broiled, and a loaf of bread which some poor ranchero's wife had made the day before, little dreaming who would eat it.

There were also some roasted potatoes, a pound of yellow butter, stolen from some settler's dairy, and a silver plate for her to eat off, which had once done service in a church from which the raiders had taken it.

At first Bessie seemed about to send the really tempting repast back to the chief; but remembering her determination she thanked the peon, and allowed him to spread it out before her fire.

He was evidently a half-breed, as his color was lighter than those of his race whom Bessie had seen before, and glancing into the man's face there was something she read there that caused her to ask quietly:

"Do you serve your master from love, or fear?"

The peon started, and gazed earnestly at her for an instant and answered:

"Few slaves serve masters from love, senorita."

"True, and if you will serve me for gold I will see that you are no longer a slave, for you can go with me and be among free people."

"Ah, senorita, what can poor Peon Juan do?" he said, with a sigh and shrug of his shoulders, and speaking in good Spanish and not the *patois* of his race.

Bessie spoke Spanish fluently, and answered quickly:

"I have with me considerable gold, several hundred pesos, and I will give them to you, if you will, in some way get my horse near here and saddle and bridle him for me."

"If you can go with me I will be glad to have you."

"Senorita, I will do for you all that I can, and you shall not go alone," was the low reply.

As he spoke he walked away, and Bessie, with some alarm, saw him approach the chief and speak to him, for she feared he had been playing a part with her, and was telling of her premeditated escape.

But he passed on toward the camps and disappeared from sight.

Eating what she could, she arose and paced to and fro nervously, her eyes upon the chief, who was now seated on a camp-stool near his fire eating his supper, having raised the skirt of the hood he wore above his mouth.

The maiden tried hard to get a glimpse of the face that was so persistently kept cowed, but could not do so, and seeing the peon returning, she kept her eyes upon him.

Again he stopped and spoke to the chief, and then came leisurely on toward the ambulance.

"Well, Juan, what chance is there?" she asked, eagerly.

"Your horse, and the chief's, senorita, are not fifty paces away, just under the shadow of yonder hill," was the low reply.

"The chief's horse?" she cried, in alarm.

"Yes, senorita, I took him for myself, as he is said to be very fast and can go all day without rest."

"Ah! you led them there?"

"Yes, senorita, I went there from the camps."

"And returned as you went?"

"It was better, senorita."

"You spoke to the chief?"

"I told him you would know when he would move on, as you were very tired and wished me to arrange the ambulance for you to retire."

"And his answer?"

"That I could do so, and you should not be disturbed until dawn."

"He is most kind," said Bessie, with scorn, and not noticing the sarcasm the peon replied:

"It is the kindness of the butcher who fattens his cattle, and cares well for them, to kill."

Bessie started at the peon's way of putting it, and said, anxiously:

"When shall we leave, for you go with me?"

"Yes, senorita, but not for gold; only let me serve you as your servant far away from the land of Mexico."

"You shall, Juan, and your lot shall not be the hard one it has evidently been in the past."

"But when do we leave?"

"I will get your saddle out at once and then we will go, but we will have to run for it, as the other raiding parties will soon be up, and may camp all around us."

As he spoke he took the saddle and bridle belonging to Bessie, from the ambulance, and while she held a *serape*, as though to warm it, up to the fire, it cast a shadow upon him, and quickly he glided into the darkness.

It seemed to the waiting maiden a long time that he was gone, and yet it was not a couple of minutes before he again glided up to her side and said:

"All is ready, senorita."

"Thank you, Juan, and no one seemed to discover your act."

"No, senorita."

"Is there no guard over there?" and she pointed to the hill where he had left the horses.

"There was, senorita."

"Was?" she asked in surprise.

"Yes, senorita."

"Why, was he removed?"

"I removed him, senorita."

"You, Juan?"

"Yes, senorita; it was best," and he pointed to his knife.

"Ah, Juan, what have you done?"

"He was in the way, senorita, and I killed him," was the cool reply of the peon, made

without the slightest seeming regret or remorse.

Bessie shuddered; but she was convinced that she had a man with her whom she could rely on as a protector, even if he was a half-breed Indian.

CHAPTER X.

THE FATAL FLIGHT.

WHILE the peon was apparently arranging the ambulance for Bessie's comfort, for it had a cot bed in it, and everything necessary to make her comfortable on her trip, the maiden quietly gathered around her the articles she wished to take with her.

Then, when all was ready the peon left the spot, passed by the fire before which El Cobra still sat, and with a word to him went on.

Bessie watched his movements attentively until he disappeared from sight, and then she waited patiently until a low whistle came from the hillside.

It was the peon's signal to her and quietly she glided away in the gloom.

Not far had she gone when before her she saw the forms of two horses, and at their head stood the peon.

"Mount, senorita," he said eagerly, and raised her to the saddle.

Then he sprang upon the back of the splendid animal he had taken from the chief, and led the way down the hillside toward the open plain beyond.

The heart of Bessie Bainbridge beat rapidly, and hope of escape was before her, when suddenly there pierced the night air a long, keen whistle thrice repeated.

Instantly it was answered by a neigh from the horse ridden by the peon, and with a sudden whirl he started back toward his master, whose call he well knew.

In vain was it that the peon drew at the reins to check him, and as he was flying like the wind he dared not jump off.

What was to be done he did not know, and behind him Bessie called anxiously to him to return.

Did he spring from the horse, which plunged wildly as he ran, the jagged rocks would kill him, and in dismay he determined to do the only thing left for him, and that was to pretend to have brought the horse when he heard the signal for him.

He would get a scolding, but that would not be death.

The next instant he darted up to the side of where the chief stood, still giving the signal for his horse.

"I have brought your horse, senor chief," said the peon in trembling tones, throwing himself to the ground and holding the stirrup for El Cobra to mount.

"You mean he has brought you, thou accursed traitor, and for this treachery your life shall be the forfeit," hissed the chief.

"Mercy, senor, oh mercy!" and the peon dropped on his knees.

"I saw the game you were playing, treacherous hound that you are, and let you have the rope to hang yourself with.

"Now die!"

With the last two words the chief drew his revolver from his belt, and then followed the flash, report and death-shriek, as the peon dropped over dead, his head resting on the foot of El Cobra, who kicked it aside and then resumed his seat before the fire.

All this, from back in the darkness, poor Bessie was a witness to, and the death-cry of the unfortunate peon found an echo from her lips.

But she was a brave girl, and mounted on her favorite horse, she was not one to back out from her attempted escape, so wheeling the animal to the rightabout, she quickly rode down the hillside, and turned into the canyon leading to the prairies.

But hardly had she gone a dozen paces when she saw a dozen horsemen coming up the canyon toward her.

Immediately she turned to fly, when behind her were others.

She was wholly cut off from escape, and sat motionless upon her horse, while one of the men came up, seized her bridle-rein and said politely:

"Senorita, you will have to return, for it is the order of the chief El Cobra."

She made no resistance, and ten minutes after had thrown herself upon the cot in the ambulance, and was sobbing as though her very heart would break, at the sad termination of her fatal flight.

CHAPTER XI.

ON THE SERPENT'S TRAIL.

THE sun was casting lengthy shadows from the west the day following the scenes just related, when a band of horsemen rode up to the very spot where the ambulance had stood the night before.

"Here is the camp, Captain Lone Star," said Elegant Ed, turning to the youthful Cowboy Captain, who just then drew rein, followed by his men.

"Yes, and the signs show that they left by dawn this morning, and have some ten hours' start of us.

"Well, we will camp here for the night, and that will give the others time to overtake us, and our horses will be rested for the ride on the morrow.

"Go into camp, boys."

With this order the score and a half of cowboys separated to lariat out their horses, and soon the camp was a busy scene.

"Have you seen any trace of Old Bitters?" asked Lone Star of Elegant Ed, who had joined his young commander at the fire which one of the men was building at the very ashes where the peon had cooked his last supper.

"Not a trace, and he may be miles ahead, for that old mule of his is a perfect engine for going, and can break down any mustang in the party," laughed Ed.

"What he lacks in beauty he makes up in speed, I suppose," said Lone Star.

"Yes, and what his master lacks in loveliness he makes up in pure, unadulterated grit."

"Well, I'll have to give Balaam a test of what Jet can do some time; but see, yonder comes the scout now."

As Lone Star spoke Balaam appeared in sight, coming at a long, swinging walk from the direction of the Rio Grande.

In five minutes more the old scout had staked him out on a spot where he could get good grass, and leisurely came toward the camp-fire, around which all of the cowboys were assembled.

"Waal, folkses, you is heur, I see," was his salutation.

"Yes, Bitters, and so are you, I see; but what is the news?" asked Lone Star.

"Waal, there were two Mexes thet took bit-
ters in thurn, pards, fer I hed a slight scrim-
mage over on ther Grande; or thet is, I would
hev hed a scrimmage ef thet hed been any
fightin', which thet wasn't, as I jist knocked
over two Greasers afore they knew what hit
them."

"Killed 'em, Bitters?" asked one.

"Does yer think a man who are knocked
over hain't kilt? Why, in course I kilt 'em.

"Yer see I rid on ahead o' yer all this morn-
in', fer Balaam ain't no slow-poke on ther
travel, and when I come heur I seen what I
s'pose yer all hes seen."

"Only that the raiders camped here last
night, and crossed the Rio Grande at dawn,"
said Lone Star.

"Thar are more ter see than that: fust, thet
were three gangs o' raiders, one going north-
ward, another east, and t'other to ther north-
east.

"Ther latter was ther one whose trail we
struck, an' thet got ther gal; t'other gangs
went in fer cattle, an' they got 'em, and all
met at this place and crossed over inter
Mexico.

"When I arrived I seen two stiffs, one ther

body o' a Mexican, with a knife thrust in him,
and t'other a peon Injun, with a bullet in his
body, and fired at durned close quarters.

"I put 'em up in ther rocks yonder to hev a
more keerful look at when all o' us was heur.

"Them two stiffs was kilt right heur, the
Injun lyin' thar, an' ther Mex right yonder
whar ther ambulamps were a-standin'.

"Thar were about ninety-nine per cent. out
o' a hundred o' men along, all told, and with
yonder fellers a-comin' we'll hev forty."

All looked in the direction indicated by Old
Bitters, and beheld, coming over a rise of the
prairie, nearly a league distant, a party of
horsemen.

It was yet light enough to see distinctly, and
a chorus of voices rung out:

"The Dean Ranch cowboys!"

"Yas, that is 'em, and as the cattle-raiders,
after crossin', will drive ther critters down
toward the Presidio, it will leave the Cobra to
go on with his score o' immegit riders, thet
allus hangs out with him, towards ther retreat
in ther hills, so what is ter be did, as we kin
lick ther moccasins off o' either party?"

"Why, follow El Cobra first, as he is the
one to capture, and he will have Miss Bain-
bridge with him," said Lone Star.

"Thet are sound sense, pard, and ef we does
we kin do ther kentry a sarvice.

"Yer kin grow more cattle any time, an'
mustangs is cheap, but yer don't pick up gals
like thet Bessie Bainbridge every day in ther
week, an' durned seldom o' a Sunday, fer I hes
met her, she has smiled a sweet smole enter me,
an' I am not goin' ter see her suffer."

This sentiment was the common one of all,
and the other cowboys coming up, they were
greeted with loud cheers.

The two men sent to collect them had ridden
well, and nearly all on the Dean Ranch had
willingly come with them, and strange to say,
Ranchero Dean, who had been away from
home, had been met that afternoon, and readily
left off his lonely hunt on the prairie to form
one of the party.

Hawley Dean was a stern man of thirty-five,
looking like a Mexican, with his swarthy face
and piercing black eyes, but claiming to be an
American.

He had quickly established his ranch some
year before the opening of this story, and
brought with him his herders from his cattle
farm in Colorado.

More than that he was rich, passed his days
in hunting alone on the prairie, sometimes
being gone weeks at a time, little was known
of him.

He dressed like a dandy, had luxuries in his
home that he had brought from New Orleans,
and lived as a king among his cowboys, who
were as close-mouthed regarding his past as he
was himself.

He was superbly mounted, well armed with
weapons of the latest and most improved pat-
terns, and in his dignified, cold way, saluted
the cowboys as he came up.

Assuming the right of authority, he in-
stantly gave orders regarding the camp, and
ended by saying:

"To-morrow we will return, and not waste
time looking at the trails of the Mexicans, for
to cross the Rio Grande is preposterous."

All looked at Lone Star, whose face had
flushed at the peremptory manner of the
ranchero, and he replied quietly:

"On the contrary, Ranchero Dean, we do
not intend to lose time looking at the trails of
the Mexicans, but to follow El Cobra to his
lair."

"I forbid it," was the angry retort, as he
bent his fierce eyes upon the young captain.

"Your authority in this camp, Ranchero
Dean, amounts to no more than that of any
one of the men.

"I am captain here, and my men do as I
say, and if you do not intend to obey orders
you must leave, or you will get yourself into
trouble."

There was no mistaking the fearless man-
ner, and the frank words of the young captain,

and Ranchero Dean sprung to his feet, crying angrily:

"Do you, a boy, dare to dictate to me?"

"I dictate to you, or any one else, who allies himself to this band, and if you do not like my words and dictation, leave," was the cool reply of the Cowboy Captain.

CHAPTER XII.

THE TELLTALE PAPER.

"SAY, pard ranchero, you may be wuff dead oodles o' tin, an' hev critters by ther thousand, with cowboys as don't dare say no, if you says yes; but I tell yer, don't rile thet young sinner, ef yer don't want ter git sp'ilt," said Old Bitters, addressing Hawley Dean, the ranchero, as he rose, in anger at Lone Star's words, and moved forward as though about to spring upon him.

"Stand aside, man, while I slap that boy's jaws for his insolence," was the furious retort.

"Don't do it, fer he hain't one o' thet kind."

Seeing that the ranchero was determined to pick a quarrel with Lone Star, and well knowing by the cool manner and quiet smile on the youth's face how it would end, Elegant Ed motioned to his comrades and stepped boldly in front of Dean, while he said:

"That young gentleman, Ranchero Dean, is our chosen captain, and we will not see him set upon by you."

"No, you has to obey ther Cowboy Cap'n or git," put in Bitters.

"Thet's the music!"

"Ef yer love us not let out."

"Let ther swallows homeward fly, as my gal singed to me."

Such were the remarks that ran round the circle of cowboys, and though spoken in a jesting tone, they convinced the ranchero king that he was not going to be allowed to run a high hand in that crowd.

He checked his advance upon Lone Star, who had smilingly gazed on without a word or movement, and said savagely:

"Wall, if you are such a pack of fools as to be led by a boy to your death, then I will leave you."

"Come, cowboys of the Dean Ranch, follow me."

He turned on his heel, and to a man the six herders on his place accompanied him, followed by shouts of derision from those they left behind.

Mounting their horses they rode away in the darkness, taking the back trail.

But hardly had they gotten out of sight, when Lone Star said:

"Quietly get your horses, boys, for we will seek another camping ground for the night."

All were surprised at this sudden order, for they could not understand it, and Ranger Ralph indulged in some mutterings regarding it; but all obeyed, and moving away in the darkness, an hour after they were on the other shore of the Rio Grande, where, in a canyon their camp-fires were lighted, and the pleasant work of preparing supper was going on.

"Bitters, come with me, please," said Lone Star in a low tone, and the scout followed him quietly from the camp.

To the surprise of Bitters the youth made a detour over hill and vale, and kept on at a trot that seemed untiring; but the hardy old hunter never flagged, and at last the two halted in a mesquite thicket upon the bank of the river.

Instantly Lone Star made his lariat fast to a tree, took the coil well in hand, and when ready, as though waiting for something, or some one to come along, he said:

"Bitters, when I catch his horse, you be ready to catch him."

"Who are I to ketch, pard?"

"A man."

"I'll do it."

"Don't hurt him."

"I won't."

"Want to hang him."

"Who be he?"

"A man."

"Ugh," and Bitters's grunt was like an Indian's, which expresses so much and yet actually has no meaning.

The two had not long to wait, before there was heard the sound of hoofs approaching.

Then a horseman came in sight, riding at a slow canter.

"Your man are coming," whispered Bitters.

Lone Star made no reply, but suddenly, as the man was within twenty feet of their hiding-place, threw the lasso.

Down over the head of the horse it settled, and the animal gave a frightened bound, to be suddenly jerked down upon his knees, while old Bitters, springing from the mesquite thicket, seized the rider with one hand, while he pressed a revolver to his head with the other.

The bound of his horse had compelled the rider to seize his reins more firmly, and the weapon of Old Bitters threatened him, ere he could place his hand upon his own, and thus he was fairly caught.

His horse stood trembling by, held by the lariat, and Bitters having drawn the man from his saddle cried:

"Lordy! but this are a good joke, for it are Ranger Ralph."

"The very man I wanted," replied Lone Star, sternly.

"Now, sir, I'll trouble you to give me that bit of paper I saw Ranchero Dean slip into your hand."

Ranger Ralph thrust his hand hurriedly into his pocket, but, before he could withdraw it, the iron gripe of Lone Star was upon him, and, while Old Bitters held him fast, the youth took the slip of paper from him ere he could destroy it, as was his evident intention.

"Tie him, Bitters."

"What means this outrage?" cried the cowboy, speaking for the first time since his capture.

"You will find out when I have read this paper," was Lone Star's remark, and with his own lariat the prisoner was securely bound and then led by Bitters back into the thicket, the youth following with his horse.

Here a match was struck, and, unfolding the paper, Lone Star saw that it was written over with pencil upon both sides, and in two different hands.

While Bitters kept matches burning Lone Star read aloud:

"RANGER—Leave a paper on the lightning-riven mesquite at the crossing, telling me which way the band goes, for I wish to press on to-night, and, therefore, cannot follow trails.

"If they divide, also tell me.

"Your advice was good, your reports I found true, and I will not forget you. E. C."

Upon the other side, while Old Bitters gazed with unfeigned surprise upon the prisoner, Lone Star read aloud:

"The band will press on to rescue the girl, and will not divide forces. RANGER."

"I found that piece of paper," said Ranger Ralph.

"And as I have found it on you it will hang you," was the calm reply of Lone Star, and the prisoner groaned, for he knew that the young Captain of the Cowboys was not to be trifled with.

CHAPTER XIII.

CAUGHT IN THE SNARE.

"Now, Bitters, just make me up a little light, and hide it as well as we can, and as I have a pencil and some paper with me, I'll have Ranger write E. C. a different letter from the one he has written."

"I never wrote that," meekly said the cowboy.

"I say that you did, for I saw the Ranchero hand you this piece of paper before he left camp."

"His name is Hawley Dean, and those

initials are E. C. so he could not have written it."

E. C. will stand for El Cobra, Ranger Ralph," was the startling, though quiet announcement of Lone Star.

"That are so, accordin' ter my eddication, an' ther fire light are ready," put in Old Bitters.

"Now, Ranger, here is a piece of paper, and here a pencil, so write as I dictate."

"I will not."

"Do you mean it?"

"I do."

"Bitters, take your knife, press it hard over the heart of this man, and if he does not do as I tell him, kill him."

"Jerusha! but you is a team and a hoss ter let, Lone Star; but I does adzactly as yer sez."

Releasing the right hand of Ranger Ralph, Lone Star held forth the pencil to him, and laid the paper upon the butt of his rifle.

"Now, write."

"What shall I write?"

"The cowboys have gone on the trail of the cattle."

"It is written," said the Ranger.

"Yes, but not in your natural handwriting, as this is."

"Change it, or Bitters will obey orders."

With a muttered curse Ranger Ralph wrote as dictated, and in the same handwriting as was that on the piece of paper taken from him.

"There, curse you," he said savagely.

"Curses do me no harm, Ranger Ralph."

"Now, Bitters, keep your eye on him, while I look up the mesquite tree that was struck by lightning, and stick this on it."

Lone Star hastily left the thicket, and after the lapse of some minutes as he did not return Old Bitters grew anxious about him.

Half an hour passed away, and unable to stand the suspense any longer, the old scout bound the prisoner securely to a tree, and went forth in search of his young friend.

He readily found the solitary tree, with its shattered trunk, standing on the bank near the crossing, and yet upon it there was no paper, and nowhere about could he see the youth.

He called to him, at first in a low tone, and then in a louder voice; but no answer came, and no sound was heard, other than the distant howl of a wolf, the murmur of the flowing river, and the rustling of the leaves stirred by the wind.

"Waal, this are more stranger than a woman be," said the scout.

"Suthin' hev happen to thet boy, sartin, an' yet he hain't one ter die 'thout a fight as would wake up a little rackit."

"Waal, I'll back ag'in arter that durned sinner an' carry him ter camp with ther news, an' ef he don't get his neck elongated, then I hain't Old Bitters at your sarvice."

Hastily returning to Ranger Ralph, who in vain asked regarding the youth, for Bitters would not answer him, he mounted him upon his horse and set off for the camp in the hills.

"Waal, Bitters, hes yer been down drinkin' ther Grande dry?" asked one of the cowboys as he saw the old scout coming toward them.

"Who are it, old man?"

"Why it are Ranger."

"What in thunder are ther row?"

"Whar are Lone Star?"

Such were the queries and remarks that greeted Old Bitters as he strode into the midst of his comrades, his hand upon the rein of the horse, to which Ralph Ranger was securely bound.

"Shet up yer chin music, will yer, an' ontie this sinner, an' then you'll hear me talk," said Bitters.

"Where is the captain?" asked Elegant Ed, coming forward.

But Bitters made no reply until Ranger Ralph was placed in the full glare of the fire, and the cowboys had all gathered around.

"I give it up," he said shortly.

"Give what up, old man?"

"Whar ther cap'n is."

"I saw him go off with you," said Elegant Ed.

"That are so, but he didn't come back with me, as yer sees."

"Where is he then?" and Ed seemed most anxious about the young captain.

"Tell your story, old man, and then I will tell mine," said Ranger Ralph, with an air of assumed *bravado*.

"Thet are just what I intends doin', my sinner pard, an' ef you don't git strung up fer the ear-ring o' a tree, I are a shriekin' pervaricator o' the truth," said Bitters, in a tone that showed he had something of a most important nature to make known to those who pressed eagerly around to hear what he had to say.

CHAPTER XIV.

TWO SIDES OF A STORY.

"PARDS, I tell yer that ther cap'n give me the word to go with him, an' I went.

"He led me around by the hills thet lies yonder to ther mesquite thicket near the Grande crossin', an' thar we stops, an' he fastens his lariat to a tree an' says ter me ter git ready to tackle somebody.

"Presently somebody, that somebody come along, an' thet thar sinner are he.

"Ther cap'n slings ther rope an' catches ther hoss, an' I grabs ther rider, an' we tuk 'em back in among ther mesquites, an' then ther cap'n tuk from this heur sinner a paper as was writ on with writin' an' spellin' an' sich like leterin', an' read out thet Ranger were thanked fer good advice and sich like, an' he were to write on ther paper which trail ther cowboys were ter take.

"Waal, on t'other side he read, meanin' ther cap'n, what looked all ther same ter me, words to ther effect thet we were to press on arter ther gal, an' not divide up.

"Ther first were signed E. C., so the cap'n said, an' ther last Ranger.

"Yer know, so ther cap'n says, thet E. C. figgerin' stan's fer El Cobra, an' it don't take a school teacher to say thet Ranger stan's for thet sinner.

"Ther paper were give to thet feller by Ranchero Dean, fer ther cap'n seen him, an' ther answer were to be stuck onto a tree thet hed been knocked endways by lightnin' down at ther crossin'.

"Ranger wrote accordin' to ther dictification, as they call it, of Lone Star, tho' he didn't want ter; but I hed orders ter stick him in ther ribs ef he didn't, an' therefore he did.

"Then ther cap'n went ter stick what was writ on ther tree, an' tho' I looked fer him I hasn't seen him since.

"Now, thet feller rid out o' camp, an' yer has my story."

"It looks very much as though you were a traitor, Ranger Ralph, and if Ranchero Dean gave you that paper, as

if he might be too," sternly said Elegant Ed.

"That's ther music!"

"You hes ther right pig by ther ear, fer Lone Star marked him."

But the remarks that were about to follow in a perfect volley from the cowboys, the lieutenant cut short, by saying:

"What have you to say for yourself, Ranger?"

"That you have heard that gray-haired liar's story and not mine."

"You shall have your chance; but hurry up, for we must look at once for the captain."

"I left camp, I admit—but it was for a purpose."

"Your purpose?"

"Well, I have of late suspected treachery, and I found out who were the traitors to-night."

"Waal, if he hain't an exalted liar thar hain't no snakes in Texas," said the old scout.

"Come, Ranger, tell your story, for we have no time to lose," cried Elegant Ed.

"I intend to. Well, those whom I suspected were that old man and the captain, who calls himself Lone Star!"

"Oh, Holy! let me hev a piece o' thet sweet liar's tongue!" and Old Bitters drew his knife.

"Hold on, Bitters; we heard your story, and we will hear his.

"He is tied and cannot get away, so let him say what he wishes to, and then it is for us to decide," and Elegant Ed showed that he was determined to have justice, and his bold manner and resolution surprised his comrades, as he had always been most retiring and modest in his mien.

"Waal, let us hear his talk, fer it are but squar'," said Bitters. "Proceed, Ranger Ralph."

"What I have to say I can soon tell, comrades, and you can judge between that old sinner and myself.

"Seeing Lone Star and Bitters leave camp, I watched the direction they took, and feeling assured they were going, by a flank movement, to the Rio Grande crossing, I rode directly there.

"In a mesquite thicket I heard voices, and dismounting, saw three forms bending over a small fire, the light of which they hid with their serapes."

"Three, pard?"

"Yes, old man, as you know.

"Two of them, comrades, were Bitters and the captain, and the other was a Mexican."

"Oh, Texas snakes!"

"Hold on, Bitters."

"I is, Pard Ed; ef I didn't I'd bu'st."

"The Mexican had given to Lone Star a paper, which he was reading, and Bitters was listening.

"When he had finished reading it, he said, addressing the Mexican:

"Senor, tell El Cobra that all will be as he wishes, and that we will lead them into the ambushade.

"I thank him for this gold, and we will divide it."

"The Mexican then left, and the captain took up a buckskin belt full of gold pesos, and began to count out some of it to Bitters, who suddenly sprung upon him, struck him a fearful blow in the head and killed him."

"Thar hain't no liars livin' in this land as kin ekal that sinner," groaned rather than said Old Bitters.

"Continue your story, Ranger," sternly remarked Elegant Ed.

"I was so horrified at the act that I cried out aloud, and he heard it and sprung toward me.

"Unfortunately I fell backward over a vine, and he was upon me, and his strength was so much greater than mine that he bound me.

"Then he left me, raised the body of the captain in his arms, and walked away.

"Soon I heard the plunge, as he threw it into the river, and returning, he came to camp with me, and told the lie he did to save himself."

As he ceased speaking Old Bitters, with a yell of rage, sprung toward him; but a dozen pistols covered his heart, and Elegant Ed said, sternly:

"Hold on, old man, or your life will be the forfeit.

"Bind him, boys!"

CHAPTER XV.

A GILDED CAGE.

UTTERLY worn out, and prostrated by her grief, Bessie Bainbridge sunk into a dreamless sleep, from which she did not awaken until a sudden jolt of the vehicle startled her.

To her intense surprise she found that it was daylight, and that the ambulance was in motion, though no driver was on the seat.

A glance out, however, showed her a Mexican walking on either side of the mules and leading them.

Then she discovered that the Rio Grande was just ahead, and behind came a score of horsemen, the same who had captured her.

Nowhere visible, however, was the hooded chief, El Cobra, but far on ahead, across the river, she saw heads of cattle being driven southward.

Taking the seat forward she addressed one of the Mexicans in Spanish, and asked:

"Where are you taking me?"

"I do not know, senorita," was the reply.

"Where is your chief?"

"I do not know, senorita."

"What is to be done with me?"

"I do not know, senorita."

Bessie saw that it was useless to talk to the polite, yet non-communicative Mexican, and wisely desisted.

Once across the river, and the ambulance halted, and her own horse was led up ready for her to mount.

A couple of pack-mules were also brought up, and a young officer said: "Senorita, will you kindly continue your way on horseback, as the ambulance continues on after the cattle?"

Knowing that resistance was useless she calmly consented, and sprung unaided into her saddle.

The things were thus taken from the ambulance and placed on the pack-mules, and forming themselves around their captive, the Mexican escort moved off to the north-west, while the vehicle continued on the trail of the cattle.

A ride of several hours and a halt was made for a rest, and Bessie was most kindly treated; but she knew that it was from fear of their terrible chief, rather than from any innate politeness or respect for her.

Again mounting the party pressed on into the mountains, and just before sunset came to the ruins of an old monastery,

which had been burned in the American war with Mexico in '46, and was then the scene of a fierce fight.

Outwardly this old ruin presented no attractions as a place of abode; but to her surprise, Bessie upon dismounting, was ushered into quarters by no means unpleasant or uncomfortable.

The stone flooring was covered with the dressed skins of wild beasts, the walls were hung with dainty curtains of white, and there was a lounge, easy-chair, and in an adjoining room an inviting bed, while a table in the plaza was already spread for a meal, and Bessie was rejoiced to see for one only, as she had feared that she might have to meet the dreaded chief.

A peon woman met her at the entrance to the ruin, and quietly looked after her comfort, and gliding here and there she beheld several Indian warriors, which proved to her that no chance for escape would be allowed her.

"Where is your chief?" asked Bessie of the woman, as she finished bringing in her things brought by the pack-mules from the ambulance.

"Nona knows not how to answer any questions?" was the woman's stolid reply, and with a sigh Bessie resigned herself to her lonely fate.

At night tapers were brought in, and a tempting supper was served, and the maiden ate with considerable relish in spite of her danger and surroundings.

Then she took up a Spanish guitar that hung on the wall, and ran her fingers idly over the strings, but dared not trust herself to sing, as she felt like crying rather.

At last she arose and said she would retire, and disrobing herself she lay down upon the cot, while the peon woman threw herself upon one of the skins to sleep, and to watch the captive too.

CHAPTER XVI.

A STARTLING RECOGNITION.

THE following morning Bessie awoke, greatly refreshed, for, in spite of all, she had slept well.

A tempting breakfast awaited her, and consisted of broiled birds, venison, *tortillas*, honey, bread and coffee, and she ate with a relish that surprised herself.

All day she was attended by the peon woman, though allowed to roam at will among the hills, gazing at the lovely scenery, and gathering wild flowers.

Not to a single question, other than absolutely necessary, would the peon woman reply, although Bessie offered her a gold necklace to answer her if she knew what were the chief's intentions regarding her.

The woman looked with stolid indifference at the trinket, though evidently sadly coveting it in her heart, yet uttered no reply.

Returning at midday, a substantial meal was served, and again the maiden went for a stroll, preferring the wild woods to the old ruin.

And then another night passed, and yet no chief appeared.

What could it mean?

Had he gotten into a battle with pursuing soldiers and been killed, thought Bessie.

No, that could not be, for there was no excitement visible in the faces of the peon woman and the half dozen warriors she saw hovering about like specters.

The Mexicans who had escorted her

there were nowhere visible, and she could not ascertain where they had gone.

Anxious to fully learn the surroundings of the ruin, Bessie again walked forth, for her mind was bent upon one thought, and that was to escape.

In a wing of the ruin she saw that her horse was kept, and her saddle and bridle hung on the plaza wall, and she was determined to watch her chance and make a bold effort for her liberty.

Reaching a wooded hill, that gave her a view of the surrounding country for leagues, she sat down, the patient peon quietly dropping upon the grass near her, for she did not allow Bessie to get ten paces away from her.

Wrapt in the beauty of the scenery, the maiden failed to hear an advancing step, or to see a tall form approaching.

But the peon woman both heard and saw, and sprung quickly to her feet.

The act caused Bessie to glance upward, and a cry broke from her lips as she saw standing within ten feet of her, and gazing calmly upon her, the tall form of El Cobra, the hooded chief.

He was dressed elegantly in the Mexican costume, but wore over his head and face the black hood and mask he seemed never to go without.

Instantly Bessie was upon her feet, her form drawn to its full high, her eyes flashing, and her face very pale.

"You can go, Nona," said the chief, in a voice that was by no means unpleasant, and the peon woman glided away.

"Senorita Bainbridge, I greet you," said the chief, bowing low.

"Who and what are you?" asked Bessie, coldly, paying no attention to his bow.

"Men call me El Cobra, senorita, and I am, by profession, a robber," was the reply, delivered in a voice of rare sweetness.

"You then acknowledge yourself that human monster, whose cruelties and cunning have gained for him the name of a serpent?" said Bessie, with intense scorn of voice and manner.

"I do, lady," responded the robber chief, and there was no sign of anger in his tone at her cutting words.

"And why have you, a Mexican bandit, dared to kidnap an American girl?"

He stepped nearer to her as she asked the question, and asked, in a low tone:

"You would know why I have done this, Senorita Bainbridge?"

"Yes."

"You will be shocked to know."

"I will listen."

"Your nerves will be taxed."

"I will listen, sir."

Again he stepped nearer, and suddenly drew off the black hood that he wore.

With a shriek of terror Bessie started back, and then sunk down upon the mossy bank in a swoon, for she had been overcome at recognizing the face that had been suddenly revealed to her by the robber chief.

CHAPTER XVII.

A LOVER'S REVENGE.

WITH his arms folded upon his broad breast, El Cobra stood gazing down upon the unconscious girl, whom the sight of him had caused to fall as though suddenly struck dead.

Only when her long-continued motionlessness caused him to fear she might be dead, did he move toward her.

Bending over her, he placed his fingers upon her pulse, and said aloud:

"It is a mere fainting-fit, from which she will soon recover."

Even as he spoke a thrill went through her form, her fingers were clinched convulsively several times, and then she opened her eyes.

Instantly she closed them, and covered her face with her hands, as though to shut out some fearful vision, and then sprung to her feet.

A moment she stood gazing upon him, the color slowly coming back to her face as she looked into his.

"Well, Senorita Bessie, we have met again, as I promised you we should," he said, blandly.

"Yes, and I would have rather died than gaze upon your hated face again," and she spoke with unutterable scorn in her tone.

"Say not so, sweet Bessie, for they are cutting words to use toward one who loves you."

"Loves me! don't pollute the sacred word, base man."

"Love me, when, because you saved my life, when I was a mere girl, bathing in the surf at Trueville, you have dogged my steps ever since?"

"It but proved my love, for the day I dragged you from the waters, even though you were but thirteen years of age, I loved you, and swore never to give you up."

"For a while you treated me with the kindness due the savior of your life, and because you knew me as your kinsman; but then your father wrote you who I was, and you turned from me."

"But I did not give you up, sweet cousin mine, but hovered near you, until I forced you to leave Paris and return to America."

"One whom you had met, and loved with a school-girl affection, left France also, and returned to his home in America, where you believed I dared not come."

"Bah! I dare do anything, Bessie Bainbridge, as you see, and I warned you that you should never marry that man."

"You defied me, and then I set to work."

"I had never met him, and hence was unknown to him, so, under an assumed name I sought him out, pretended to be his friend, made him presents, led him into all kinds of temptation, and one night played cards with him until I won every dollar he had in the world, which was only about enough for him to live in a love-in-a-cottage style had he married you."

"He accused me of cheating him, and I struck him, and of course a duel followed, and the result you well know, for he was secretly and hastily buried where he fell, as the seconds wished to hush the matter up and I had to fly."

"But ere I left I wrote and told you what I had done, and that one day you should be my wife."

"And still I defy you," cried Bessie earnestly, while, during his recalling the bitter past to her, she had gazed him steadily in the face, though very pale, and her eyes had dimmed, and lip quivered, when he spoke of the young lover he had killed.

"Well, you see that so far I have made my words good, and though you have preferred this far frontier to the life of a

brilliant belle in New York, which you could lead as an heiress and a beauty, I know that it is because you feared me, and wished to be near your father for protection.

"But here I have come too, and now see the result—you are wholly in my power."

She seem to realize the full truth of his words, and for a moment her fortitude appeared about to desert her; but rallying, she said in a tone of contempt:

"Yes, and I find that my father's warning against you was not undeserved, and that my abhorrence of you was just, for in you I now behold the man who has won the name of a serpent, from his cruelty and fiendishness."

"Yes, I am El Cobra, a supposed Mexican, but in reality an American, and your cousin."

"I could not lead an honest life, so I took to outlawry, and I have made a success of it, as I have a band under me that defies the United States soldiers under my gallant uncle, Major Bainbridge."

"And what is your intention regarding me?" she coldly asked, keeping up the same defiant manner.

"I will tell you, sweet cousin."

"I will listen most attentively," she answered, as he paused.

"It will not please you."

"Nothing you can say will."

"Well, I intend to make you my wife."

"Never!"

"That depends upon you and your father."

"I say never!"

"We shall see."

"I would rather die."

"Would you rather become a pauper?"

"A thousand times, yes."

"And your father would rather have only his major's pay to live on, than have you my wife?"

"A thousand times, yes."

"But you love gold?"

"I love my self-respect far more."

"Your father loves gold."

"He loves his child far more."

"We shall see."

"Your words imply that you have terms to offer," and a sudden thought flashed upon her.

"I have."

"Name them."

"If I make you my wife it will be only from revenge."

"A strange lover."

"I hate you, Bessie Bainbridge."

"You proffered love awhile since," she sneered.

"I lied in doing so; I hate you and I hated your father before you."

"How has he, or have I ever wronged you?"

"I will tell you, though you know the story already."

"Upon my word I do not."

"And your father would say the same."

"And would tell the truth."

"We shall see, sweet cousin Bessie."

"You ask how you and your father have ever wronged me."

"Well, we were both reared by my father, his uncle, though he was my senior half a score of years."

"His father was poor and left him to the care of my father, who was rich."

"He was a steady sort of a youth, entered West Point, and lived a quiet life, while I had Old Nick in me, grew dissi-

pated, was wild as an Indian, and gambling heavily lost more money than I could pay, or my father would pay for me."

"I wrote to your father under the circumstances, confessed my difficulty, and begged him to write to the old gentleman for money for himself, and let me have it."

"I knew that he would get it; but he refused to do this, wrote me a letter of advice, and hoped it would be a lesson to me."

"That letter made me a forger, for I forged a draft, got the money, and found out, and was sent to prison."

"But I escaped, though I killed a keeper in doing so, and became a wanderer in foreign lands, living by my wits and gambling."

"It was then that I met you, Bessie."

"In the mean time my father died, disinheriting me and leaving my fortune to your father and to you."

"Now you know why I hate you both."

"I make gold by my robberies, but I am tired of this life, and could I get my just dues, my large fortune in your father's hands, I would leave this country forever, and live like a prince in a foreign land."

"Now my terms are, that you and your father surrender to me every peso inherited from my father, or you become my wife."

"When you are ready to tell me what you will do, send the peon, Nona, to me."

He wheeled abruptly upon his heel and walked away, leaving the maiden standing like a statue gazing after him, while she muttered:

"Yes, all must go, rather than that I should become the wife of such a creature."

CHAPTER XVIII.

ON THE BRINK OF DEATH.

To say that the scout, Old Bitters, was astounded at the turn affairs had taken, would be to draw it most mildly.

He had listened to the story of Ranger Ralph, with a real admiration for his ability in lying, never for a moment believing that the cowboys would put the slightest credence in it; but when he saw that they did, and he was not allowed to spring upon his maligner and tear his false tongue from his throat, his indignation and rage knew no bounds, and he stood panting from emotion, and glaring upon all around him.

Having had the thought flash through his mind to gain time in some way, by the mysterious absence of Lone Star, for he knew that the cowboys would quickly try and hang him, the ready wit of Ranger Ralph had caused him to throw the whole onus upon Old Bitters, and most successfully too.

"You hev tied a man's hands, pards, thet never were tied afore, except when Injuns hed me at ther stake to burn me, an' yer doubts ther honest word o' a man as never told a lie, an' allus hes acted squar' clear through, 'ceptin', I'll allow, with red-skins, an' they is pizen ter go fer any way," said Old Bitters.

"Bitters, I believe in your truth, my old friend; but both you and Ranger Ralph have been absent from camp, and you left with Captain Lone Star, and return with that man a prisoner."

"You told your story about him, and I want to believe it is true; but, then, the captain's mysterious absence is accounted for in a most startling way by Ranger Ralph."

"If you had not brought him back as you did, and Lone Star was missing, I would at once suspect the Ranger, for I feel that he hates the captain at heart."

"But I wish to do no injustice to one or the other, and hence you must submit to be bound until the boys decide which is guilty."

"Lordy, Elegant Ed, but you is a born lawyer, an' no mistake."

"He talks like a parson with honey on his tongue."

"He's a music-box for chinning sweet tunes."

And so on went round the criticisms on Elegant Ed's little speech.

But suddenly Ranger Ralph broke in with:

"Try us if you are going to, and have it over with."

"We will. Come, boys, and let us decide this matter, for we must find out if Lone Star is really dead, as the Ranger says, and if not, go to look him up."

"Yas, circle round, pards, an' hev yer little chin-music," put in Old Bitters.

The cowboys all gathered together around the fire, and Elegant Ed was appointed judge, and with a prisoner on each side of them, turned to Old Bitters and told him to repeat his story in every particular.

"I'd a durned sight rather not, Ed; but as this gang o' idyits hes blood in ther eyes, an' a rope will fit my neck same as thet sinner's, an' I hain't no desire ter leave this 'arth by way o' a tree, I'll spit ther tale out fer you ag'in," and then Old Bitters went slowly and carefully over his story, and his words carried truth with them.

"Now, Ranger Ralph, we will listen to a repetition of your story."

"Thet are well put, Elegant Ed—it are a story from A to gizzard."

Ranger Ralph then commenced the recital of his narrative, and his easy manner of talking also won for him the thought from many that he was telling the truth.

"Old Balaam can't run as fast as the feller's tongue kin trot out lies," said Old Bitters.

That the cowboys were in a quandary there was no doubt, and this Ranger Ralph saw, and instantly his face lighted up, as he said:

"I told you that the stranger I saw with Lone Star and Bitters gave the former a buckskin belt of gold pesos, and if you search that man you will find that I have spoken only the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth."

"I heerd a nigger preacher say them words in court in San Antone once, about a chicken he hed stole, and jest then the rooster flopped out o' his coat-tail pocket; but ther jedge ruled as he hed sed chicken, an' ther rooster were full-growed, thet he hed not lied, an' nothin' were done with him 'bout it."

All laughed at Old Bitters's story, but it did not help him, as to the buckskin belt of gold, and Elegant Ed said:

"Have you a buckskin belt of gold with you, Bitters?"

"I hev."

Every one of the cowboys cast a suspicious glance at the old scout, while Ranger Ralph laughed.

"Let me see it."

"I hev but two grippers, an' they is tied; it are in my shirt heur."

Ed at once drew the buckskin belt out, and saw that it was heavy with gold.

"Where did you get this, Bitters?"

"I found it over by ther campius, on t'other side o' the river, and in my scrimmage with thet sinner it fell out o' my buckskin hunting-shirt, an' he seen it, an' it helped him ter make up ther lie ag'in' me."

"Why did you not speak of it before?"

"I did tell Lone Star about findin' it."

"But to us?"

"Waal, I didn't see as it consarned any o' you."

"Look on that side of it, Ed, for it has a name on it!" cried Ranger Ralph, whose quick eye had detected some letters on the buckskin.

Elegant Ed turned the belt over and read aloud:

"*El Cobra!*"

One yell burst from the cowboys at this thrilling discovery, and every eye was turned upon the old scout.

"Waal, one would think I were sittin' for a picture ther way yer looks at me," he said, angrily.

"Hang him!"

The cry broke from the lips of Ranger Ralph.

But it was enough to arouse the heated passions of the wild set of men around the fire, and instantly a score of voices shouted:

"Ay, hang him!"

To show how quickly they had decided who was guilty, they at once set Ranger Ralph free, and a lariat was thrown over a limb, and loud voices cried:

"Drag the traitor here and hang him!"

"Pards, ef yer swings me up, I dies a innercent man, as I will sw'ar afore high Heaven."

"Don't do it, fer some day yer'll find yer hev done me a wrong, an' yer can't then fetch ther old man back, an' remorse will come ter yer in ther dark o' night, an' it hain't no pleasant pard ter go ter bed with."

"Give me a leetle time, an' don't hang me."

Old Bitters spoke earnestly, but without a quiver in his voice.

But the maddened cowboys would not listen to reason, and began to drag him toward the tree, and Ranger Ralph himself fastened the noose around his neck.

Unflinchingly he faced them, and said:

"Boys, yer is wrong; but go ahead, fer ther old man hain't afeerd ter die."

"Only a leetle minute o' suff'rin', an' I crosses o' ther Great River, whar you'll foller afore long."

"Good-by, boys, the ole man are ready!"

CHAPTER XIX.

COWBOY JUSTICE.

"HOLD, boys, for that old man shall not die like a dog!"

The speaker was the sad-eyed, handsome young cowboy, whom the mysterious disappearance of Lone Star left captain of the cowboys.

All knew him as a mild-mannered young man, whom all liked, and who seemed out of his sphere as a cowboy; but in spite of his modest manner there was no one that had cared to ~~rouse~~ him to anger.

Now he sprung forward as he spoke, and laid his hand on the rope that was tightening around the neck of the old scout.

"You stand back, Elegant Ed, for I'll stand no interference in this matter of hanging a man, whose lies nearly placed me in this very position," cried Ranger Ralph, excitedly.

"And where, by Heaven, I believe you ought to be, for, with all the appearances against Old Bitters, I don't believe him guilty," was the bold reply of Elegant Ed.

"Well, he is guilty and shall swing for it; and then I'll deal with you, my handsome cowboy," said Ranger Ralph savagely.

"You'll deal me with now, sir, if you don't let go your hold on that rope," and, as quick as a flash the revolver of Elegant Ed covered the heart of the Ranger.

He saw that he was at the mercy of the cowboy lieutenant, and he well knew that there was no better shot in the band, than was Elegant Ed, and sulkily he dropped his hand, while he cried out:

"Pards, will you see me set on this way, for wishing to punish a man who sought to hang me, and who was a traitor with Lone Star, for I saw them take the gold?"

"No, we must hang the scout, Ed," said one.

"Yes, we are convinced he is guilty," cried another.

"Ranger Ralph's right, pards."

"String the old traitor up!"

"Get away, Ed, and let us do our work!"

"You stand back, Elegant Ed, for we don't want to have no quarrel with you."

It was evident that nearly every man of the band was against him; but this did not cause Elegant Ed to yield one inch from his determination to save Old Bitters, who stood boldly upright, watching and hearing all, yet uttering no word, or showing the slightest sign of emotion.

"If you hang that man, you have first to kill me," sternly said Elegant Ed, and with a revolver in each hand he faced the crowd.

There was not a man present, excepting Ranger Ralph, but liked Elegant Ed exceedingly, and was under obligations to him for many little favors rendered; yet they would not be cheated out of their hanging treat even for him, especially when they felt morally convinced that Old Bitters was a traitor, and really deserved hanging.

"You must yield, Ed, for though we don't want trouble with you it will have to come, if you attempt to protect that old man," said one who was a self-appointed spokesman.

"You must give him time, for I believe him innocent," said Elegant Ed firmly.

"Nary time; up he goes now."

"Stand back! for the man who lays hand on him I will kill."

The cowboys saw that the lamb had become a lion when aroused, and they did not doubt Elegant Ed's intention to keep his word; but they were all bent on mischief, and a voice cried:

"Wing him, some one o' you who can hit dead center, and then run in on him."

It was evident that this proposition was about to be carried out, for half a dozen revolvers were drawn among the crowd.

But suddenly a slender form glided up

in front of Elegant Ed and Old Bitters, and his arms were extended, and each hand grasped a self-cocking revolver, while in the softest tones he said:

"Now, gentlemen, what is the row?"

"Lone Star!"

"The captain!"

The cries were upon every lip, and Ranger Ralph quickly fell back from the front, and endeavored to slip away through the crowd.

"Hold on, Ranger Ralph, or I fire!" cried Lone Star, catching sight of him.

Instantly the man, driven to desperation, turned, with frenzy in his face and a revolver in each hand; but a dozen cowboys saw his intention, and at once threw themselves upon him.

A short scuffle followed, and Ranger Ralph was securely bound, while Lone Star said in his easy tones:

"Now tell me what dear Old Bitters has done, that I find him in this plight."

"I hain't done nothin', pard, but tell ther truth, an' they was a-goin' ter hang me fer it, fer thet feller sed as how he seen us talkin' to a Mexikin in ther mesquite thicket, an' he guv us a belt o' gold pesos, an' we was traitors, an' sich like."

"The infamous liar!" ejaculated Lone Star.

"An' he sed," continued Old Bitters, in his quaint way, "as how I kilt you an' threw yer body in ther river, an'—"

"Enough, Bitters, and let me tell the boys what that wretch is," angrily said Lone Star, motioning toward Ranger Ralph, who lay bound upon the ground, in the full glare of the camp-fire.

Then he told the story which Old Bitters had related, and, ashamed of themselves, the cowboys ran forward and hastily released the old man from his bonds, and dragged Ranger Ralph under the swinging noose of the lariat.

"They are going to hang him, Lone Star," cried Elegant Ed, quickly.

"I do not care, for he richly deserves it," was the indifferent reply of the young Cowboy Captain, and the next instant, unmindful of the shrieks of the poor wretch for mercy, he was dragged up into mid-air, and the rope silenced forever the voice of Ranger Ralph.

"Leave him hanging there, with this pinned to his jacket," said Lone Star, and he fastened to the hanging, dying man, the treacherous paper he had found upon him.

"Now, pards, mount and follow me, for I have work for you ahead," was the order of the Cowboy Captain, and in ten minutes after they had ridden off in the darkness, leaving the ghastly form of Ranger Ralph swinging to and fro, and casting sickening shadows from the fire-light's glare.

CHAPTER XX.

LONE STAR'S ADVENTURE.

I WILL now return to the mysterious disappearance of Lone Star, when he left the mesquite thicket, to tack the piece of paper upon the lightning-riven tree on the river bank.

He had nearly reached the tree, when up over the steep bank came several horsemen, and he was forced to step down into a rut in the trail to hide from view.

It was just deep enough and wide enough to hide him from view, as he lay at full length in it, and there he remained while the horsemen halted near, and after a few words of conversation one of them rode on to the tree.

Returning, he uttered an ejaculation and an oath, and said:

"Something has prevented his leaving it. Come, we will go on up to the timber, and I'll think over what is best to be done."

The horsemen, half a dozen in number, rode away, and instantly Lone Star determined to keep them in sight, gain the timber, and hear what their intentions were.

He followed them at an easy gait, for about half a mile, and then saw them enter a piece of timber.

"Now is my chance," he muttered.

But, as he spoke he heard a hoof-fall behind him, and quickly sprung to the shelter of a large tree near by.

The next instant a horseman appeared in sight, riding leisurely along, and evidently giving his horse the rein.

In the darkness even, Lone Star detected the head-dress of feathers worn by Comanche chiefs, and with rapid movement he sprung out and seized the bridle-rein of the mustang, while his revolver was thrust full in the face of the red-skin, and in the tongue of the warrior he cried:

"You will die if you do not surrender—"

The Indian was wholly taken by surprise, and he knew that a movement would end his life; but he said in a husky tone:

"The Black Panther fears not to die; let his pale-face foe send him to the happy hunting-grounds."

"Black Panther, the Yellow Hair is glad to see you," instantly replied Lone Star, and he lowered his revolver and held forth his hand.

And the mention of the name of Yellow Hair caused a change in the manner of the Comanche too, for he grasped the outstretched hand of the youth, and said in a tone of real pleasure:

"The Black Panther is happy, for he never forgets his little white brother, Yellow Hair."

"Nor does the Yellow Hair forget his old friends, Panther; but what are you doing here?"

"Going to the home of the great bad white chief."

"Ah! El Cobra?"

"The Yellow Hair speaks straight."

"What has the Panther to do with El Cobra, the bad chief?"

"He promised the Panther yellow gold to raise the hatchet against the pale-face warriors and people, that dwell on the rising-sun side of the great river."

"Indeed! he pays you to war against Americans?"

The Indian grunted assent, and then said:

"But his tongue is crooked, for he paid not the Panther the yellow gold for his people."

"Yes, I see; he promised you gold to go on the war-path against the whites, while he could cross the Rio Grande, with no fear of the soldiers, who would be on the trail of your warriors, and run off what cattle and horses he wanted, and do what damage he could."

"He is a precious devil, and the Black Panther is a fool to be his brother."

"The Yellow Hair speaks straight," said the Indian, not in the least angry with the youth for his plain words.

"I know that I do, and I will be the friend of the Black Panther if he will help me."

"Let the Yellow Hair speak, for the ears of the Panther are open."

"Does the Panther know the home of El Cobra?"

The chief nodded assent.

"Will he lead the Yellow Hair there?"

Again a nod.

"How many warriors has the bad pale-face chief at his wigwam?"

The Indian denoted the number by holding up five fingers.

"Five soldiers only."

"No soldiers of the dark pale-face, or the light pale-face," he answered, meaning the Mexicans and Americans.

"He has peons then?"

"No, only a peon squaw, and so many of the Black Panther's warriors."

"Ah! and the Black Panther will lead me and my warriors there?"

"The Panther has spoken."

"Enough, now come with me, and we will talk it over."

Back to the thicket then went Lone Star, followed by the Indian, in whom he seemed to place perfect confidence, but Old Bitters and his prisoner, as the reader knows, had gone, and in surprise the youth retraced his way to the camp of the cowboys.

Not wishing to take the Comanche there with him, until he had convinced his comrades that Black Panther was really their friend, Lone Star, after a long talk with the chief, left him to wait in a thicket, and watch the movements of the half-dozen horsemen, whose movements he had wished to spy upon, and telling him that he would join him there soon, went on alone to the bivouac of his little band, and arrived just in time to prevent a tragic scene, which might have resulted in the death of Elegant Ed, and would certainly have ended with the hanging of Old Bitters.

CHAPTER XXI.

BLACK PANTHER'S TRUE TRAIL.

WHEN the cowboys followed Lone Star from the place of encampment, they were most anxious to make up, by eager attention to his every wish and order, the unkind suspicions they had held of him, and they were almost affectionate in their manner toward Old Bitters, and each one had offered his hand and humbly begged the old scout to forgive and forget his cruel treatment.

Old Bitters accepted their hands and said to each one:

"I'll forgive yer, but durned if I kin so soon fergit what condemned fools yer was."

When Lone Star had left the camp so suddenly, all felt that he had some project on hand, and had made some discovery of importance; but he made no explanation to other than Old Bitters and Elegant Ed, who rode on either side of him.

After a ride of about two miles, Lone Star drew rein and said in a voice that was low, yet distinctly audible to all:

"Boys, you all know that the Comanches are the natural enemies of the pale-faces; but there is one near here whom I wish you to treat as a friend, as well as several others whom we will meet ere very long."

"They are our allies in a good cause, and the man who quarrels with them will have me to deal with in a way he'll remember."

Telling Elegant Ed to wait with the others, he rode on alone, and soon after

the cowboys heard the hoot of an owl not far away, and in the distance the answer of its mate.

For some minutes they waited, and then two horsemen appeared in sight, one of whom was recognized as Lone Star, and the other was seen to be an Indian in full war-paint and the toggery of a chief.

"Boys, this is my red brother, the Black Panther."

"Panther, you will find my warriors your friends."

Such was the simple introduction of Lone Star, and yet it caused many of the cowboys to give a sudden start of surprise, for they all knew the Black Panther as a most vindictive chief against the whites, and one who had been almost invariably victorious in his battles with soldiers and settlers alike.

In the only word of English which he could command, Black Panther acknowledged the introduction:

"How!"

That was all he said.

"How!" repeated the cowboys, in chorus, though several spoke a word or two in the Comanche tongue, while Old Bitters said aloud in English:

"Of all condemned old varmints that I ever fit, the Black Panther are the goldarndest, an' he'd give as much ter sculp me this very blessed minute as I would ter raise his ha'r; but this heur are a peace conference, ther cap'n says, so heur goes ter play ther perlite to ther red nigger."

Then, in good Comanche, and a little English, which is thrown in *par parenthese*, Old Bitters continued, as he grasped the chief's hand:

"The White Hunter is glad to meet the Black Panther of the Comanches (darn yer red skin), for he has heard of you as a great chief (and hunted fer yer skulp many a time.) Ther Hunter will be the friend of the Black Panther forever and ever (Lord fergive me fer bein' a liar ekal to ther Ranger.)"

"Come," cried Lone Star, amused himself at the old scout, but anxious to prevent the cowboys' laughter from making the chief think he was being ridiculed.

Placing himself at the head of the line Lone Star rode on, with Black Panther by his side.

Behind them came Elegant Ed and Old Bitters, the latter talking incessantly, and following in twos were the thirty cowboys.

After a ride of several miles those in advance halted, and Lone Star said:

"Ed, I want you to take all but four men, and hasten on after those cattle-thieves, which Panther says are encamped about ten miles from here, at the Hacienda spring, which Bitters can lead you to."

"Dash into the camp, which you will find most of the Mexicans have left to go on to the town, and drive off the cattle, and you can reach the Rio Grande, if you push them well, a little after sunrise, where you can make a stand against pursuit, and perhaps find some soldiers to aid you, as Major Bainbridge will have had time to arrive from Duncan."

"Lone Star, are you going on to the rescue of Miss Bainbridge?" asked Elegant Ed, in a low tone.

"Yes."

"You expect to be able to accomplish it?"

"I certainly do, for Black Panther

knows El Cobra's haunt well, and will lead me there."

"But he may have a large force?"

"No, no more than I can manage, with Panther and the four men I take with me."

"Captain Lone Star," and Elegant Ed's manner seemed embarrassed, while his voice was low and quivered.

"Well, Ed?"

"I seldom ask a favor of any one, but I do beg of you to let Old Bitters go on after the cattle with the boys, and allow me to accompany you."

"Why do you ask this, Ed?" and the youth seemed struck by the strange manner of his lieutenant.

"I will frankly tell you, Lone Star; I am acquainted with Miss Bainbridge, and circumstances of a most painful nature separated me from her, and caused her to think ill of me, and now, by aiding in her rescue, I wish to try and redeem the past in her eyes."

"You shall go, Ed, and Bitters can take the boys on after the cattle," was the generous response of Lone Star, and giving his orders over again, the two parties separated, the Comanche chief, Elegant Ed, and three cowboys accompanying the young captain.

Unerringly the Panther led them on until the tired horses demanded a rest, and then he stood guard while they slept for several hours.

But with the dawn they were again in the saddle, and after a ride of several leagues the Indian halted in a deep and wild canyon, and said, addressing Lone Star:

"Let the friends of Yellow Hair wait here, while he follows the Panther."

"The tepee of El Cobra is there," and he pointed up over the hill.

Explaining that he was going to get the bearings of the old ruin, in which Black Panther had said El Cobra had his retreat, Lone Star followed the Indian on foot, and after ten minutes' walk came in sight of the old monastery.

But suddenly he halted, for he saw before him two persons who riveted his gaze.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE RESCUE.

THOSE upon whom the eyes of Lone Star, the Cowboy Captain, fell, were, as the reader had doubtless surmised, none other than Bessie Bainbridge and El Cobra, who stood talking together, a few hundred paces from the river, where it will be remembered the chief had joined the maiden.

"Quick, Panther, back to the canyon, and bid my white brothers come here," cried the youth.

"They must know that my warriors guard the bad chief?"

"Yes, and will turn no shot against them, but only upon El Cobra."

"The Black Panther will do as his white boy brother says," and the Indian disappeared.

Hardly had he gone, before Lone Star crept still nearer to the chief and the maiden, gaining a position where he was within forty paces of them, and near enough for him to hear their voices, though not to catch their words.

As he saw the chief plainly in the face he started, and muttered:

"It is as I thought; the very man himself."

A moment after El Cobra turned an-

grily away, and, walking toward the ruin, Bessie Bainbridge was left alone.

Hardly had the chief gotten half way to the ruin, when Lone Star gave a low whistle.

Instantly it caught the ear of Bessie, and looking in the direction from whence came the sound, she saw a white face, instead of that of a red-skin as she had expected to behold.

But it might be one of El Cobra's Mexican escort and no friend of hers, she thought, and she did not move from her position, yet kept her eye upon the top of the hill.

Again the face appeared, youthful and beardless, with long golden hair.

Surely this was no Mexican, she thought.

But still undecided she stood, when distinctly came the words:

"Miss Bainbridge, is that you?"

"Yes, I am Bessie Bainbridge," she quickly answered, and a thrill of joy shot through her heart.

"Walk here to me quickly and I will protect you," came the glad words.

She could hardly refrain from a cry of joy, and her limbs trembled beneath her weight from nervousness; but with a mighty effort of self-control she regained her composure and walked briskly toward the hill.

At that very moment El Cobra walked back, evidently having before forgotten in his anger, that he had left Bessie unattended, although his Indian guards were not far away.

And, as he walked he saw her hastening toward the hill, and at the same time beheld a head suddenly bob down behind it out of sight.

A wild war-cry broke from his lips, to rally his dusky guards, and like the very wind the chief bounded in pursuit of his captive.

Alarmed by the cry Bessie rushed forward, clambered up the hill, tottering as she ran, for she heard the ringing war-whoops of the savages in answer, and suddenly threw herself half fainting into the arms of a man who had stretched them out to receive her.

At the same moment El Cobra dashed up the hill, and Lone Star sprung out and confronted him, shouting as he did so:

"Well, Ranchero Hawley Dean, we meet again."

"Curse you, boy, take that!"

But the revolver dropped from his hand ere it exploded, as a bullet from Lone Star's pistol pierced his heart.

Springing forward the Cowboy Captain placed his foot upon the fallen man, and leveled his revolver at his head; but life had already taken leave of the splendid form, and the dark, evil face of the mysterious ranchero had on it the seal of death.

Just then there came bounding forward the half-dozen Comanche guards, that El Cobra had kept about him at the ruin, rather than men of his own race.

But raising his voice Lone Star called out a few words in their own tongue, and checking their run, they came forward at a walk, and without apparent hostile intention, and greeted their chief, Black Panther, with a shout of welcome, as he just then came over the hill-top.

"Let my warriors see the face of an old friend, Yellow Hair, our boy pale-face brother," said the Panther.

Instantly the warriors seemed to recog-

nize one they had known well in the past, and springing forward forgot their stolid mien and warmly greeted him.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE RETURN.

THE one into whose arms Bessie Bainbridge had sprung, with such perfect abandon in her alarm, was Elegant Ed, and upon his broad breast she had pillowed her head and burst into tears of joy.

But realizing her conduct, she suddenly released herself from his protecting arm and sprung back with a low, embarrassed apology.

Yet the words seemed to freeze upon her lips, as she caught sight of his face, and her form trembled, and she seemed about to fall, as she cried in thrilling tones:

"Oh Heaven! is it an apparition, or are you Edwin Egbert?"

"I am Edwin Egbert, Bessie," was the low reply.

"Thank God!" came fervently from her lips.

"And I too say thank Heaven, Bessie, that you are out of all danger," was his answer in a low tone.

"And I owe it to you, Edwin, whom I believed dead."

"No, Bessie, you owe it to that brave youth yonder, at whose hands fell El Cobra, in whom I now recognize an old foe, my bitterest enemy, who, under the guise of friendship, ruined me, and then as he believed killed me in a duel."

"But how did you escape, Edwin?" she asked, drawing nearer to him, and unnoticed Lone Star with the Indian and three cowboys gathered around him.

"I fell, severely wounded by his fire, and my seconds hastily arranged to bury me; but being fearful of being found there, paid an old farmer living near to give me decent burial."

"He found I was not dead, took me to his house, sent for the country doctor, and I came round all right in time, thanks to my hardy constitution."

"Ashamed of myself for my conduct, in having entered upon a wild and reckless life, I allowed all to believe me dead, and emigrated with my kind friend, the old farmer, to Texas, and am now manager for him on his cattle ranch, and head herder, or cowboy, as we are called."

"I am poor, and almost friendless, Bessie, but my love for you is as true as ever, and all I wish is to have you forgive me, and then I will go far from you."

"You will do no such silly thing, Edwin Egbert, for I do forgive you, and I will forget your wild life, while I love you more than ever I did, and have riches enough for both of us."

"Now come and let me thank that very handsome youth yonder, to whom you say I owe my rescue, and who killed El Cobra, who is none other than Hawley Dean Bainbridge, my unfortunate cousin, whom you have heard me speak of, and whom a bullet has saved from the gallows."

Edwin Egbert, or Elegant Ed, led Bessie forward and presented her to Lone Star and the other cowboys, and the young captain quite charmed her with his handsome face and free-and-easy air, and leading the way to the ruin, said he would do the honors as host until they started on their return.

The body of El Cobra was buried in the old ruin, and finding plenty of horses

near by, Lone Star packed the things found in the ruin upon some of them, and mounting the Indians, among whom was Nona, the peon woman, who decided to return with the Comanches to their village, the whole party set off for the return.

Long ere they reached the Rio Grande they heard the shouts of the cowboys, driving the cattle across the river, and knew that Old Bitters and his party had been successful, and, upon arriving upon the other bank, were met by a large party of soldiers just about to cross over and press on to the rescue of Bessie.

At their head rode Major Bainbridge, a handsome man of forty-five, and recognizing him, Bessie called out to him, and the father and daughter were again united.

CHAPTER XXIV.

CONCLUSION.

BACK to the fort went the troopers, and at the urgent request of Major Bainbridge, the company of cowboys accompanied them, as did Black Panther and his braves, for the commandant promised to give them a grand blow-out on their arrival.

By the Comanches going was cemented a peace on the border that lasted as long as Major Bainbridge held command there, and at a wedding that took place some three months after the rescue of Bessie from the power of El Cobra, it was estimated that half of Black Panther's village was there, while it was positively known that all the cowboys for a hundred miles around were present as invited guests.

It is useless I suppose, kind reader, to say that those who were married on that occasion were none other than Elegant Ed and Bessie Bainbridge, who are now residents of New York, having made the metropolis their home.

Old Bitters was made chief of scouts of the fort, and I believe still holds that position, and will until his death, for as he expressed it:

"I are fixed heur ontill my toes turn up, when my chips is called in."

The cowboys of Texas are still characters and stern necessities in the Lone Star State, and in fact in other States now, and among them are many dashing, noble fellows, with hearts as big as the cattle they herd.

And Lone Star, the Cowboy Captain, what of him?

He told who and what he was to Bessie, Edwin Egbert and the major, and how he had been in his early boyhood stolen from his home by Apaches, who had killed his parents, and burned their home, and he had never been able to find trace of them since.

Hating the Apaches, and learning of an intended raid they purposed making against the Comanches, he had made his escape, sought the village of Black Panther, and made known the coming of his foes.

The result was a grand victory for the Comanches, and the making of Darrell Dunstan, or Yellow Hair, as they called him, and Lone Star, as he has been known to the reader, a boy chief.

In the Comanche village dwelt a white priest, who for some reason had left his people forever, and he had taught Darrell Dunstan most diligently, and on several occasions had taken him to Galveston and New Orleans to show him the sights.

But back to the Comanche camp they would go, and the youth had not cared to leave there as long as the old priest lived; but at last death took him away, and the boy had ambition to strike out for himself.

The priest had left him some money and a few precious stones, which he had set in a star of gold, and with the money he had bought some cattle, and established himself upon a ranch as a ranchero.

His life among the Indians had made him a little wild, yet it had inured him to all kinds of hardships and made him an expert in the use of all kinds of weapons.

As he was anxious to distinguish himself, he had formed the intention of hunting down El Cobra and his robbers of the Rio Grande, and for that purpose had sought out the cowboys.

And his success in breaking up the robber band, and killing the dreaded chief, who, as a ranchero, had lived in the midst of the people he robbed, gained for him, through the influence of Major Bainbridge, a cadetship at West Point, where he graduated first in his class, and is now a gallant officer stationed upon the far frontier, and known to but very few as the one-time Lone Star, the Cowboy Captain.

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